The future of electronic entertainment issue#134

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PLAYSTATION2 I XBOX I GAMECUBE I PC I GBA

Previewed: Harvest Moon, J
Sabre Wulf, Star Wars Battle
Battlefield: Vietnam, ShellShc
Reviewed: Armed & Dange
Final Fantasy Crystal Chro
Nightshade, SFII Anniversa
Plus: The Smith brothers on
Lara Croft, budget games ur
microscope, full ATEI coin-op

The next generation

Ready for Xbox2, PS3 and N5?





Yes, that is the question: are you ready for the next generation of gaming hardware? There's little doubt that you are because, let's be honest, as an **Edge** reader you're a give-me-the-moon-on-a-stick kind of person. But, more importantly right now, are developers ready?

Clearly they weren't when PlayStation2 arrived, its first wave of games delivering simple graphical updates of established themes. And no one can actually *promise* that the very first PS3/Xbox2/N5 titles will deliver anything to raise the hairs on the back of your neck to the angle they occupied when you first set eyes on PS *Ridge Racer* or Nintendo's *Super Mario 64*. This time around it's more than a simple matter of ramping up polygon counts and throwing in more memory-intensive textures. As this month's feature outlines (see p68), the next generation of dedicated gaming hardware will be genuine evolutions of what has gone before, not simply the same components as last time but turned up to 11, and this will have an enormous impact on how the next generation of games are created.

Within 18 months to two years we will see new *Resident Evils*, new *Halos*, new *Mario* games and more, and on the face of it they'll look familiar, only different, with more sophisticated lighting, special effects and physical properties. The work that will go into getting their sophisticated imagery on the screen, however, will be hugely more complex than it is to get, say, an average GameCube title running today. The consoles will be revolutionary computing devices in their own right, and the difficulties development teams had getting their heads around PS2's convoluted hardware configuration will only be amplified by a new wave of technology that is necessarily more complex.

This will mean that the novice developers will flounder and the experts will thrive, and the evidence will be there for all to see. Would you have it any other way? Of course not. After all, moons on sticks don't come easily...



Features











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the look-at-textures-on-that issue











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"We need more input. We gotta fill this thing up with data. We gotta make her as real as possible, Wyatt. I want her to live. I want her to breathe. I want her to aerobicize."











Regulars

Testscreen


SEGA
NO SMOKING
HAINSWORTH
BRENT
mei
SEGA
SEGA
Monte Carlo
RED-HOT



Sega the star at ATEI

Euro coin-op trade expo sees little new traditional gaming emerge, leaving F-Zero and OutRun 2 to take centre stage

ATEI smells of money. Not the new money of the games industry, not of designer T-shirts and credit cards, but of sweat and coins. Metal money, fairground money, proper, solid, physical money sliding down the slots and into the metal bellies of squawking curios. It smells of money, and it sounds like a thousand robots shouting for your attention. A heady mix, sure, but not one that necessarily appeals to us. After all, when you have all the processing power you need at home, what's left to *crave*?

See, there is a standard ATEI news piece that has appeared in **Edge** every year for at least half a decade. It is not a negative article so much as one which is so very tired – tired of showing up to an arcade show which offers little for gaming journalists to get excited about, tired of seeing the arcade industry slip away from videogaming and into other areas of coin-slot entertainment, tired of writing that same article. There was a time when visitors to ATEI could expect thrilling previews of futuristic technology. No more. There was a time these games would be the ones craved by console gamers two years hence. No more, no more.



The Taito stand was dedicated to celebrating the 25th anniversary of a little-known shoot 'em up called *Space Invaders*. We'd never heard of it

"ATEI smells of money, proper solid fairground money, and it sounds like a thousand robots shouting for your attention. A heady mix"

ATEI's role now is to show the amusement industry's creativity in separating the consumer from his or her money. Shorn of the simple louder-prettier-faster techniques by the sophistication of modern-day home entertainment hardware, arcade investors have to look elsewhere to draw the crowds. We ponder the state of the arcade industry as we stand quietly in the queue for the first morning of the busy event. The most obvious area of evolution is in touchscreen gambling, often sneered at by gaming's more vociferous evangelists, and claimed as one of the driving forces behind the death of the arcade machine. The truth is more complex, not least because quiz machines now often offer simple gaming (clones of *Qix* and *Puzzle Bobble* are commonplace, and their development seems to be moving in parallel to that in iTV gaming).

Regardless, the touchscreen machines



Ring Riders

A motorbike/motorcross simulator that breaks no boundaries but provides good, solid fun. *Ring Riders*' real selling point may be that its pneumatic base and (relatively) small footprint, crossed with fourplayer linkup potential, provides visceral and thrilling multiplayer entertainment. The premise, though, is so well worn that we can't help but wonder how many arcade owners are going to risk investing in more than one of the neat and tidy machines.





A selection of dancing games naturally put in an appearance, but in terms of trade-show popularity their time appears to have passed

Tux Racer

The world's first Linux-based commercial coin-op, centred on a cabinet version of a game which will be well-known to users of the Windows rival. Players must use hand-sized flipper-shaped plastic left and right buttons to steer Linux mascot Tux down one of four treacherous ice-covered hillsides, collecting fish on the way. Hitting the buttons alternately speeds up Tux, *Track 'n' Field* style, but makes controlling the open-source mascot more difficult.



are out in force here in Earls Court, the same cavernous space devoted to ECTS six months before. Swathes of the arena are dedicated to multiple-choice risk and reward. There's an important truth here for the future: despite everything being on free play, few people are actually interacting with the display models, and perhaps that's indicative of their appeal. People love gambling, and when the machines are offering their charms for free there's no risk, no reward, and very little appeal. Buyers chat to the salesmen about prices, and salesmen try to chat to us about new features, but – without the benefit of alcohol or the prospect of cash – there's no reason to stick around. The slot machines that line the arena are less lonely, but the people playing them do so more out of habit than desire. Reels lock and lights flash, signature samples herald miniature victory, but it's an empty victory without the rider of clunking pound coins building up in the collect tray.

The slots' single concession to the future is in the graphics-capable monitors embedded within the very latest models. Every single machine here, no matter what its purpose, has a TFT screen attached. Those screens represent the futility of trying to reinvent a type of game already essentially perfected, new technology bolted onto old devices to freshen up their ages-old appeal.

It's interesting, then, that arcade videogaming may take a similar scavenger approach to the future. Namco launched *Aim For Cash* at ATEI, its first shot at the potentially lucrative Skill With Prizes market. It is old, old technology – just *Point Blank*, right down to the garish blue and pink plastic lightguns – but with the cash incentive that drives SWP gamers. Given that arcade games have been measuring user success and play times since their inception, allowing owners to tailor cabinet skill levels to maximise their profits, it seems peculiar it's taken the major manufacturers so long to make this leap of logic. We take our last shot and hand on the gun to a small child, who nods a polite thank you.

> "Every single machine here has a TFT screen attached, new technology bolted onto old devices to freshen-up their ages-old appeal"

Namco's presence is multifaceted – *Aim For Cash* is just the part of an entertainment broadside that includes both traditional videogames (*Tokyo Cop*, *Ring Riders*) and a raft of more mechanical, *Pac-Man*-branded pleasures. *Pac Capsule* and *Pac Grab Jnr* are both variants on the fairground robot arm game, while *Pac-Man Ball* is like a cross between Pachinko, a coin pusher, and *Bust-A-Move*. It's not the only company to show its ambitions beyond the digital, either. Konami's stand is fronted by a crude



F-Zero AX

The arcade version of the Sega and Nintendo's futuristic racer, developed in parallel with the GameCube version. We defy any of our readers to see the *F-Zero AX* machine in action and not to want one for themselves. The software's successes are well documented in these pages, the VR Sim hardware – a pneumatic anglepoise cabinet – is the stuff of futuristic racing dreams, and players stagger from the combination with wide eyes and smitten hearts. The game of the show? Certainly.









Namco's *Pac-Man* games and Konami's *Cyclone Fever* – a coin-pushing cab. The Konami stand also contained lightguns and pool, bringing a real mixture of machine types to the show floor

Tokyo Cop

Namco's modern-day take on *Chase HQ*. Players chase criminals across four Tokyo districts – Shinjuku, Hibiya, Ginza or Shibuya – and are awarded points and new vehicles for successfully apprehending suspects. *Tokyo Cop*'s distinguishing feature is its PIN save-game utility, which allows players to store their progress using a unique code. Codes store rankings, criminals captured and the types of cars unlocked, kind of like a low-rent version of *Initial D*'s memory card system.



driving game, *Valve Limit*, which it's distributing in the UK. Behind that, though, lies a bizarre mix of forms of entertainment: a bland big screen lightgun game called *Sir Yes Sir*, a pool game (*Pocket Pool Fortunes*) that's been doing the rounds for a while, and *Cyclone Fever*, a coin-pushing machine which has nothing more sophisticated than two shuffling shelves and a host of tokens.

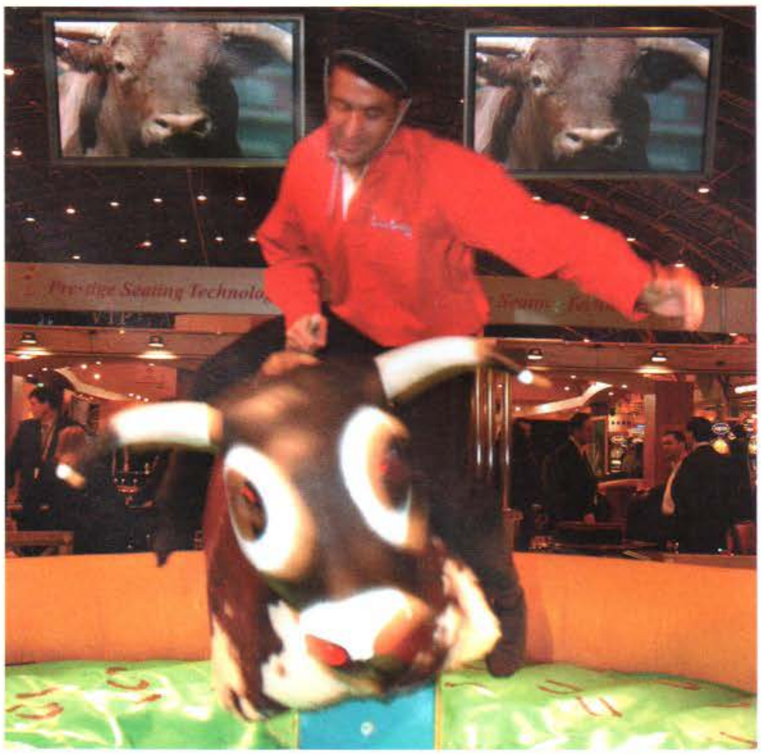
Tottering precariously on a stool, a six-year-old girl grabs a fistful of tokens and starts to slide them into the machine. Her mother is talking to a Konami representative about purchasing options, and we consider the difference between ATEI's attendees and those at ECTS. For a start, there are children here – actual, honest-to-God children, not the 'Deputy Manager, GAME, Stafford Branch' type that get underfoot at ECTS – despite it being an adults-only show. We suspect the leniency there comes from the fact that thirsty teens don't try and get in here in the numbers they do for the videogame version. Attendees are (in the main) smartly suited, videogame-phobic middle-aged men, while exhibitors' suits fit less neatly, and their eyes have that wide-boy glint you only find in the less-reputable corners of ECTS.

And they try to sell you everything. Locking mechanisms for expensive cabinets. Soft toys and plastic trinkets. Any size of flat-screen monitor you care to name. Dispensers for pocket money gifts, Health Robinson contraptions dispensing spherical pleasures in the most convoluted

OutRun 2

Sega's sequel to a 17-year-old classic. On the one hand, it's difficult to imagine where Sega could have gone wrong with this IP and a brief for a remake. On the other, even stripped of history and reputation, *OutRun 2* is clearly a cut above most arcade games, all sheen and polish and finely tuned satisfaction. Still resolutely an arcade game, it does not seek to alter the form of the original, just to emulate its feel and bless it with modern technology. It achieves both admirably.





A bull-riding sim attracted the usual strong-thighed chancers, but if riders felt it was a touch unrealistic, pictures of what an actual bull might look like were thoughtfully provided on screens

way possible. Air hockey. Food grills. Air-conditioning systems. Sweets. Pool tables, crazy pool tables, electronic pool tables. Skee ball. Fully-featured flight sims. Covert cameras and security systems. The biggest grabbing machine we have ever seen. *Parker Bohn III Pro Bowler*, a puck-based bowling sim, and then, down the side of the hall, a bowling alley. Yes, a bowling alley.

Then there are the videogames. If we decide not to consider the Generic Arcade Racer – a paragraph on *Valve Limit* should be enough – then that's perhaps 70 per cent of the arcade machines at the show eliminated. There are few surprises, in truth – a new version of *Pump It Up* here, the latest in the *House Of The Dead* series there. A miniature version of *Dragon's Lair* – labelled the anniversary edition – sits quietly in one corner. Nearby there is a new take on the equally flimsy *Mad Dog McCree, The Last Bounty Hunter*. The Taito stand is all about *Space Invaders*, which celebrates its 25th birthday with some special-edition cabinets, its ever-appealing tabletops, and some designer-label handbags.

The complex cabinets littered throughout the show attract some attention, but most have been seen before – Sega's *Route 66*, for example, which sits in a mock truck cabinet, and the three-screen *Strike Fighter*. *Star Wars Starfighter* becomes something above a distinctly average shooter when given a base that wobbles you around a bit, while Namco's *Kart Duel* works on the principle that a kart racer is much more realistic when your backside is two inches from the floor. There are at least two own-brand rollercoaster simulations, too, and we watch two businessmen in sweat-stained shirts vibrate to within an inch of their virtual lives.

Of more recognisable entertainment value is Sega's *Air Trix*, the three-year-old board mechanism continuing to attract would-be boarders. The company's recent

"There are at least two rollercoaster simulations, and **Edge** watches fat men in sweat-stained shirts vibrate to within an inch of their lives"

Valve Limit

A straightforward racer distributed by Konami in the UK. If one game sums up arcade videogaming's current malaise, it's this. Players sit in a hideous, clunky yellow cabinet, and race against the clock along nondescript streets. They are encouraged by sparsely clothed polygonal women who look like they were modelled and textured in 1995 by a trembling 15-year-old. Not quite the worst game on display at ATEI, but certainly the most tediously shameless.





home-entertainment record may be unenviable, but within arcade gaming it appears to be absolutely peerless. It's interesting to note that the two most impressive old-style coin-ops of the show are both Sega creations. *F-Zero AX* may be all but identical to the GameCube version, but the pneumatic cabinet (and the age-old arcade thrill of gambling your investment against your prowess) makes the experience unforgettable. *OutRun 2* is the show's biggest draw – a solid shot of Ferrari-red pleasure is predictably, consistently, popular.

In fact, spending time there defines the day. The sit-down *OutRun* machines are lined up in a *Daytona*-style bank of eight, pairs of businessmen dropping in and out to challenge each other. The sound of this part of the arena is one long drawn-out sample of squealing tyres, warping metal, and announcer hyperbole all over an eight-channel remix of every *OutRun* theme ever. It is deafening, but then much of the show is. After all, amusements require punters, and punters don't visit unless they know about something, and carnies have known forever that the only way of telling someone about something is to shout. *OutRun 2*'s cacophony is just a digital roll up, roll up – and people do because ATEI is a fairground, and this, a videogame, is the main attraction. And the killer? It's an attraction that console gamers – even those who swear blind the arcade industry's dead in the water, and who have done for at least five years – can crave too. Roll on ATEI 2005.





Enclosed flight simulators (top) proved popular, especially those with a massive 58-inch screen in the cockpit, while the mix of guns and horse racing at the Sega stand was too much to resist

Shootout Pool

A Naomi-based pool simulator, similar to Konami's SWP *Pocket Pool Fortunes*. The Dreamcast may be gone, but the Naomi board continues to prove an economic way of powering sophisticated arcade machines. Sega's go at producing a cue-based pool simulator is not only technologically superior to Konami's, but preserves the Naomi cabinet's slimline appearance and supports a range of trick shots.



Virtual Pinball

A plasma-screen take on the traditional pinball table. We have mused on TAB's virtual pinball machine in Out There before, but the reality of videogame pinball is more disappointing. The table on show at ATEI was simple and unsatisfying and while there's a neat thrill-of-the-future feel to your first few minutes on the machines, soon that fades away to a yearning for the tactile sensations real pinball has to offer. A crude shoot 'em up is included with the machine, showing the table's versatility but failing to enhance its appeal.



Nintendo prepares double vision

Announcement of a new dual-screen, dual-processor handheld – codenamed Nintendo DS – delivers little more than confusion



The pithiest response to Nintendo's DS came from Teagan Morrison, who posted a spoof prototype render of a new 'BS' handheld on www.the3Dresource.com

Two screens? The puzzlement was palpable. Nintendo was always expected to reveal a new console unrelated to either its GameCube or Game Boy brands early in 2004, but the leftfield conceit behind the Nintendo DS has baffled the industry. In a press release dated January 20, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata said: "We have developed Nintendo DS based upon a completely different concept from existing game devices on order to provide players with a unique entertainment experience for the 21st century."

The central feature of Nintendo DS is the dual-screen display, consisting of two separate three-inch LCD screens, believed to be arranged one above the other. "Players can look forward to being able to manage their progress from two different perspectives, enhancing both the speed and the strategy of the challenge," gushed the press release.

"For example in a soccer game, users can view the whole game on one screen while simultaneously focusing on an individual soccer player's tackle or goal on the other screen. Players will no longer be forced to interrupt gameplay to shift perspective, such as moving from a wide shot to a close up, or alternating between a character's ongoing battle and a map of the environment. Nintendo DS makes it possible to perform the tasks in real time by simply glancing from one screen to the other."

Software for the Nintendo DS will not come in the form of cartridges or even discs, but a new 'thin memory card' format

Nintendo's handheld gaming revolution

The most popular console to come out of Nintendo's labs is not the NES, SNES or N64, but the Game Boy – by an enormous margin. Its importance to the company is evident when you consider how many times its design has been overhauled...



The original GB's popularity was simply down to good old Nintendo innovation



The GB Pocket was the first indication that Nintendo was going to evolve its handheld



GB Light: same gaming functionality, but with additional viewing capability

that is cheaper to manufacture. Keeping the price of software down will be essential to allow DS to compete with Sony's PSP. DS will also use a rechargeable battery, like its GBA SP predecessor.

A wireless link-up feature has been mooted, although Nintendo has chosen to postpone discussion of this matter until E3. Unlike the PSP, no video or audio player functions have been mentioned in connection with the DS, and it seems Nintendo is unwilling, or unable, to go down the multimedia route.

In-house development for the system is already underway, with Shigeru Miyamoto heavily involved. Nintendo claims that thirdparty developers have already seen the product, although no western software studios we contacted were aware of the exact nature of the DS until the January 20 announcement. "From an independent developer's point of view, the Nintendo DS is not such an interesting future prospect – not until it proves itself at any rate," says **Dave Box**, director of Mobius Entertainment, the studio behind *Max Payne* on GBA.

"I'm sure most publishers will feel the same way. Coding and designing for such a device is an intriguing prospect, but sadly that counts for little," he added.

Karthik Bala, CEO of Vicarious Visions – responsible for GBA *Tony Hawk's* – was surprised by the DS announcement. "It's too early to make a call on whether DS is going to be successful or not. Nintendo is trying to expand the handheld market by introducing a parallel product to Game Boy," he said.

"This can be good for all of us, and you have to give Nintendo a pat on the back for this. They also know more about the handheld business than anyone else, so they have a lot going in their favour. What they need for the DS is strong software support at launch – which is going to be tough since most publishers and developers have their 2004 slate figured out already."

"You have to give Nintendo a pat on the back. They know more about the handheld business than anyone, so they have a lot in their favour"

Consumer reaction to NDS has been mixed. Many internet-based commentators interpreted the dual-screen idea as a gimmick instead of a genuine gameplay innovation, invoking the spectre of the risible Virtual Boy. Even Nintendo's loyal band of supporters has been relatively quiet.

Nintendo's own 'soccer game' suggestion for how the two screens could be used is unconvincing, although there is obviously some potential in the DS idea:



Nintendo's dual-screen concept is hardly new, of course, having been exploited with its Game & Watch series during the '80s

roleplaying games could feature an action screen and a statistics screen, in much the same way as *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* utilises the GBA to display character information; an extension of the dual-character mechanic of *Mario & Luigi* would be interesting. Even simply using the two screens to extend the playing area would at least offer something different to existing handheld platforms.

It's difficult to believe that Nintendo would launch a new piece of hardware without some pretty astonishing in-house software behind it, but effective thirdparty support could prove to be a stumbling block. The company will also have to begin educating the consumer in its new dual-screen way of thinking, and that's an area in which the company has previously been reluctant to invest.

With a 2004 release date in Japan and the US, E3 will bring the Nintendo DS vision into clearer focus.



Even with the introduction of the colour model, GB games retained standardisation

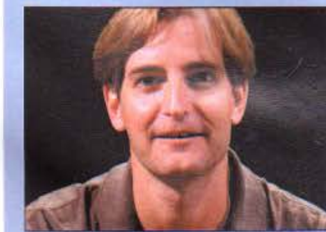


GBA was one of Nintendo's most important pieces of hardware to date. And it worked...



...well, apart from the obvious problem, fixed with SP. NDS will offer another 'clam' design

CUTTINGS



Ed Fries quits Microsoft

Ed Fries, respected VP of Microsoft Game Studios, has resigned. Fries had been at the company since 1985 and was responsible for all internally produced games in addition to signing up studios such as Ensemble and Bungie to the Microsoft cause. Seeking to explain his shock decision to the 'San Jose Mercury', Fries said: "As we start to plan the next Xbox, the question for me is whether I want to sign up for another five years or not. I was only willing to do that if there were some changes made in the group. We couldn't find a mutually agreeable set of changes. I'm in the position where I can be really picky. Things were 90 per cent right at work. I wanted them to be 100 per cent right."

According to sources close to Microsoft, Fries never saw eye to eye with corporate VP and chief Xbox evangelist J Allard. It was Fries who fought for the Xbox hard drive, although it seems that Microsoft may abandon this costly feature when it comes to Xbox 2. Fries was also believed to be influential in striking the expensive deal with Rare, which is yet to yield top return. Former Microsoft Game Studios COO, Shane Kim, will temporarily cover Fries' position.

Digimask faces up to EyeToy

Sony has teamed up with facial capture technology specialists Digimask to allow you to put your own face into games using the EyeToy camera. Previously this feature had only been available to console owners via a complex manoeuvre involving emailing digital photos from a PC, as supported by *Tony Hawk's Underground*. With Digimask technology on board, owners of an EyeToy camera will be able map their face into a game without need for a broadband connection or any thirdparty involvement.

The first PS2 game to support Digimask and EyeToy is due to emerge from Sony's London Studio in July.

Capcom pledges new focus on west

Japanese game giant promises an end to poor PAL ports amid a renewed desire to court a non-Japanese audience



Capcom's localisation efforts don't enjoy the greatest of reputations with European gamers, thanks to the kind of carelessness that leaves imposing black borders at the top and bottom of the screen in *Devil May Cry* and other games to run at less than their originally coded speeds. Step forward Capcom president **Kenzo Tsujimoto**, who at an international press event in Las Vegas on January 29 apologised for previous poor performance and promised that the company would funnel additional funds into US and European localisation from now on.

This isn't an act of pure altruism, as Capcom is mindful of the shrinking Japanese market and is keen to gain more of a foothold in the west. "We are shooting for a goal of ten per cent market share in all three regions [Japan, US and Europe] within five years," said Tsujimoto. "We intend to put all of our energy into increasing our international market share."

To this end, Capcom unveiled a new 'swords and sandals' action title called *Shadow Of Rome* and emphasised its commitment to the popular *Resident Evil* and *Onimusha* franchises. *Shadow Of Rome*, for PS2 only, emerges from Capcom's Production Studio 2 under the watchful eye of *Onimusha* don Keiji Inafune. The game combines thirdperson action with chariot racing and bloody arena brawling.

Meanwhile, the company thrilled the assembled press corps with an awesome video of gameplay footage from *Resident Evil 4*. Series originator Shinji Mikami is back in the director's chair and is apparently keen to steer the franchise in a more action-oriented direction. A press release promises 'the inevitable destruction of society.' Which is always, after all, a commendable aim for a videogame. A winter 2004 release date is assured.





Capcom will be paying more attention to localisation and PAL conversions in an attempt to grab ten per cent of the market in the west. The firm also announced a new actioner, *Shadow Of Rome*

Jack up the box

Microsoft kicks off ambitious initiative to offer Xbox owners additional media without the chips



The Xbox Media Extender Kit in action, allowing you to flick through your stored albums with a flick of the supplied remote control. The kit could also turn your Live setup into a telephone

Microsoft has unveiled plans for its Xbox Media Extender Kit, allowing you to officially enjoy the kind of multimedia benefits owners of chipped machines have been evangelising for the past year.

The box will contain a pair of discs to activate the kit through both PC and Xbox, as well as a remote-control unit, but no the headset while using the kit. It continues the company's push to converge the Xbox's media capabilities through the use of software, as opposed to Sony's need to issue add-on devices or amalgamated hardware in order to broaden the PS2's basic functionality. It's being sold on the back of convenience – of several family

"The kit is geared to allow you to enjoy 'digital entertainment' on your Xbox: TV, photos and movies, Napster support, as well as Xbox Live"

cabling. While the facilities by no means approach those of an up-to-date EvoX dashboard, the kit is geared to allow you to enjoy 'digital entertainment' on your Xbox: TV shows, photos and movies.

Microsoft also made mention of built-in Napster support, as well as Xbox Live applications such as chatting to friends via members using different instances of the media centre to pipe digital entertainment from their PCs to different rooms at once – but how many Xbox-owning families are so techno-clad that they need such a network?

Regardless, release date and price are as yet unknown, but an RRP close to that of *Music Mixer* is likely.

Instant upgrade for PSX

Having failed to deliver all it promised at launch, Sony moves quickly to update all-in-one unit's functionality

PSX's Japanese launch at the end of last year was either a huge success or an abject failure, depending on who you believe. The reality is probably somewhere in between: Sony claims the initial shipment sold out, but a survey of retailers in 'Nikkei Weekly' reveals a high level of dissatisfaction, with 40 per cent of those questioned feeling that sales fell below their expectations. Their major beef appears to be Sony's inability to properly distinguish the PSX from the PS2 in its marketing campaign, but the downgrading of several key features prior to launch was also viewed as significant.

To wit, Sony has now manufactured a free upgrade disc to address some of the machine's shortcomings. With the disc installed, you can now rip and play music as MP3s, play CD-R discs and store image files as TIFFs. Hard disc/DVD dubbing speed has been doubled, USB keyboards are supported and a few bugs fixed.



The PSX feature set has been returned to something like its originally promised level, thanks to Sony releasing an update disc. There's another one to come, however, before it's fully functional

However, another upgrade disc is already planned for March in order to include support for the DVD+RW format, GIF image files and, intriguingly, the PlayStation2 broadband unit. This last inclusion makes us wonder why broadband access for playing PS2 games online – or for internet surfing and downloading web content for that matter – didn't come built-in to the PSX. As noted in last month's feature, the unit does include an Ethernet port, but it is blocked by a warning sticker. The reliance on a series of upgrades or patches goes against Sony's reputation as a 'plug-and-play' manufacturer, and nor does it bode especially well for PlayStation3's supposed status as a convergent media centre device.

Still, PSX won't launch in the UK for at least six months, so plenty of time to get it right from the start here.

Recently reviewed

A rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Deus Ex: Invisible War	PC, Xbox	Eidos	Ion Storm	7
Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly	PS2	Tecmo	In-house	7
Onimusha Buraiden	PS2	Capcom	In-house	6
Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance 2	Xbox, PS2	Acclaim	Black Isle	7
I-Ninja	PS2	SCEE	Argonaut	6
R: Racing Evolution	PS2, GC	Namco	In-house	4
Pac-Man Vs	GC/GBA	Nintendo	Namco	7
1080° Avalanche	GC	Nintendo	NST	8
Gran Turismo 4 Prologue	PS2	SCEI	Polyphony Digital	5
kill.switch	PS2	Namco	In-house	6
Astro Boy: Tetsuwan Atom	GBA	Sega	Treasure	8
Sega GT Online	Xbox	Sega	Wow Entertainment	6
Rogue Ops	PS2, Xbox, GC	Kemco	Bits Studios	2
Dynasty Warriors 4: Xtreme Legends	PS2	THQ	Koei	5
Arc: Twilight of the Spirits	PS2	SCEE	Cattle Call	4
Sword Of Mana	GBA	Square-Enix	Square-Enix/Brownie Brown	6
Trackmania	PC	Digital Jesters	Nadeo	7
F-Zero Falcon Densetsu	GBA	Nintendo	In-house	5
Magatama	Xbox	Microsoft	Microsoft Game Studios	4
Donkey Konga	GC	Nintendo	In-house	6



1080° Avalanche



Pac-Man Vs



Deus Ex: Invisible War



Fatal Frame II

CUTTINGS



3G 'mixed reality' gaming debuts in Adelaide with Frank

Still not found a use for your 3G videophone? Blast Theory, a collective working on the art/tech/gaming interface, has a suggestion. Its last happening was called 'Uncle Roy Is All Around You', and involved a real-life 'deathmatch' on the streets of London as players hunted down Uncle Roy with the aid of satellite tracking and the internet.

'I Like Frank' is set to pull much the same trick in Adelaide from March 2-13, with 3G GPRS phones eradicating the need for street players to lug around bulky sat nav equipment. Assuming you're not planning an Aussie holiday any time soon, you can log on to www.ilikefrank.com to register to play from home.

Sports Interactive unveils Football Manager after split with Eidos

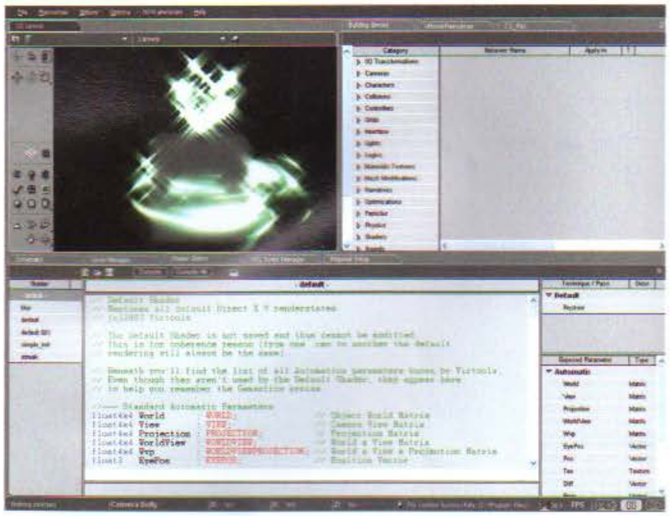
After quitting its deal with publisher Eidos last year, Sports Interactive, creator of *Championship Manager*, has signed up with Sega Europe. The spirit of *Champ Man* will live on in Sports Interactive's new franchise, forcibly retitled *Football Manager*, the first fruits of which will be *Football Manager 2005* in the autumn. Eidos retains the rights to the *Championship Manager* name and will release its own consumer-confusing footy management game under the old moniker at around the same time. It has established a new London-based development house entitled Beautiful Game Studios to code it.

Sports Interactive is also holding a competition on its website at www.sigames.com to design a logo for *Football Manager*. The prize is £10,000 – a good incentive, perhaps, to learn how to use Illustrator properly.

www.virtools.com

Right tool for the job

The latest version of the Virtools Dev package demonstrates the French middleware provider's novel philosophy of game development



Virtools Dev 3.0's has support for Microsoft's High Level Shading Language, which should make it easier to create high-quality material texture effects like water, fur and wood grain as well as custom effects such as blurry lighting and sparkling shapes



Tooling up

The main new features for Virtools Dev 3.0 reflect many of the broad shifts current within game development. Asset management has been beefed up with the addition of NXN Alienbrain's database into the tool suite. Microsoft's Effects Framework for pixel and vertex shaders, as deployed in DirectX 9.0, is also included on the feature checklist.

More proprietary is the action manager. This productivity enhancement builds on the Virtools Scripting Language introduced in Dev 2.5, allowing users to better import and organise their scripts. Finally, physically modelled cloth behaviour blocks have been added to the library, enabling the simulation of wind, gravity and collisions on fabrics.

In the big, bad, competitive world of game middleware, there seems to be no place for a little fish. In one corner RenderWare is trying to bodycheck Unreal while avoiding a two-handed chop from Alchemy, and in the other Gamebryo is kneeing Jupiter in the places it hurts – price and features.

Somewhere in the midst of the melee sits a small French company. At least it appears small initially, but on closer inspection perhaps Virtools is merely perfectly formed. Its client list contains some of the biggest names in game development, including Electronic Arts, Ensemble Studios, Ubisoft and Warner Bros Online. Yet, in a demonstration of how complex the game making process is becoming, Virtools' value to those companies isn't concerned with getting games finished quickly. More often it's about getting them started properly.

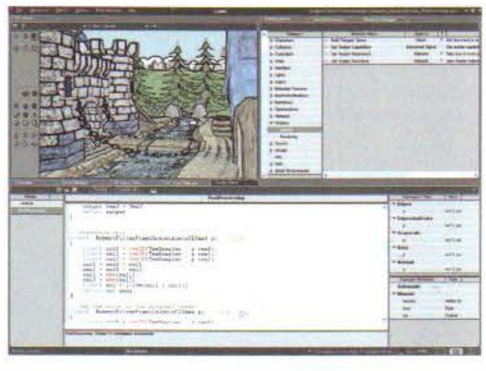
Evolving out of Virtools' virtual reality visualiser for industrial firms such as Peugeot and Aerospatiale, Virtools Dev has built its reputation as a prototyping tool because of its speed and ease of use. Virtools' vice president of R&D **Nicolas Galinotti** says this is based on a different philosophy to other middleware companies. "Instead of the 'classical' game engines, which are only accessible to low-level programmers, Virtools provides a user-friendly environment accessible to scripters and game designers but which doesn't neglect the rendering quality," he explains. "It allows you to create interactive applications by graphically assembling what we call behaviours in Dev's intuitive interface."

These behaviours are Virtools Dev's programming building blocks. Representing 500 library actions that can be triggered, the user can visually daisychain them together to create complex meta-behaviours. Custom blocks can be programmed using the Virtools Dev SDK.

The result is a package that is highly flexible and is often used in game preproduction for prototyping ideas. It has also found a niche as a platform for developers of downloadable web games. One client is Flashbang Studios, whose debut game, an educational title called *Beesly's Buzzwords*, is a finalist in the Independent Game Festival in San Jose, held under the auspices of the Game Developers Conference.

Matthew Wegner, CEO of Flashbang, says Dev's visual approach was key. "I'm the only programmer in the company, and I'd be hard-pressed to create a spinning-cube DirectX demo with C++, but I can create complex projects with Virtools," he says.

Meanwhile, somewhere in a secret lab deep under Paris, Galinotti and other Virtools engineers are hard at work on the next version of Dev, which will coincide with the release of the next wave of console hardware. "It will be a big step forward," Galinotti promises. "We're focusing on direct multiplatform project development, so you can author for many targets instead of doing multiple ports."



It might not look that simple, but thanks to its use of behaviour building blocks and a scripting language Virtools Dev 3.0 is a lot easier to use than most comparable packages

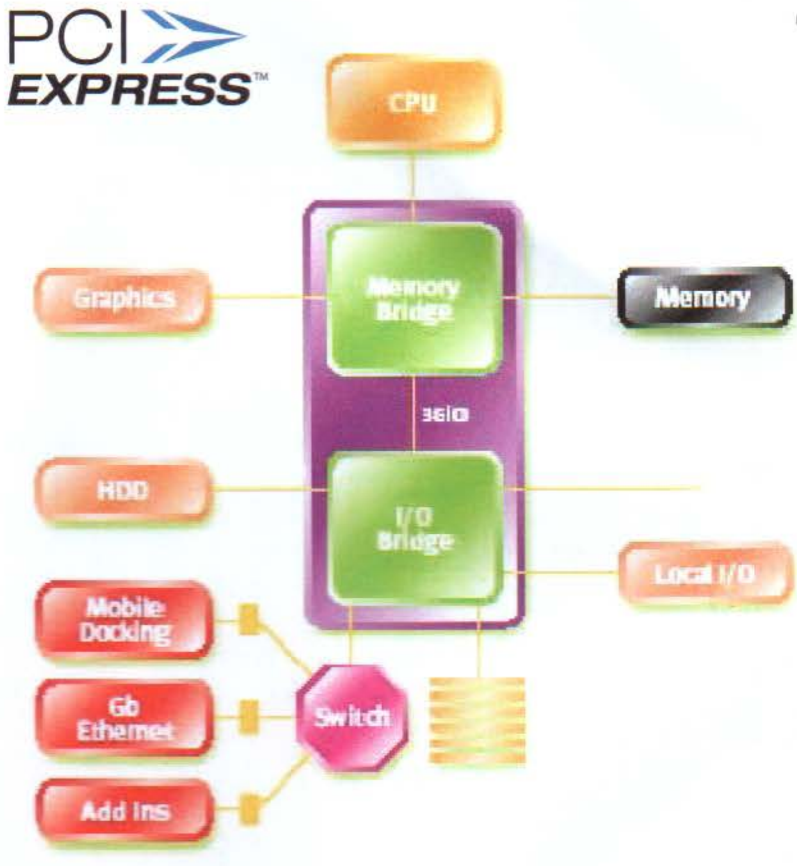
Catch a faster bus

www.express-lane.org
www.pcisig.com

Not only will PCI Express be cheaper and quicker than existing system buses but it could also help change the size and shape of PCs



One result of PCI Express is a new form factor for add-ins. Currently labelled NEWCARD, these hot-swappable sealed units will bring the ease of use of USB to complex systems



PCI Express will replace the current PCI and AGP buses which connect components such as graphics cards, Ethernet, sound cards and other add-ins into the PC's northbridge/southbridge architecture

Despite its multibillion dollar status, there's something oddly charitable about the PC components industry. Locked into a state of continual self-improvement, it always seems to offer more for less. Faster processors, more memory and thinner monitors have been made available while pricing slowly drifts downward. The latest component to undergo the cheaper/better treatment is the PCI bus, which controls the flow of data from the CPU to subsystems such as graphics and sound cards. Granted, the introduction of the new and improved PCI Express architecture is unlikely to inspire a swarm of shoppers to PC World, but it does provide the foundation for the next generation of PCs.

Developed as a low-cost, high-speed input/output interconnect technology by an industry-wide organisation consisting of companies such as AMD, IBM, Intel and Microsoft, PCI Express is designed to replace the current PCI and AGP standards.

"The PCI bus has served us well for the last ten years, but processors and other PC components now demand much higher bandwidth," explains **Ajay Bhatt** of Intel's desktop architecture labs, who is also chair of the PCI Express technical working group.

"The most important thing about PCI Express is it offers much higher bandwidth – 60 times the throughput of the existing PCI bus," enthuses **Richard Huddy**, ATI's European developer relations manager. "This means you'll get a more responsive PC."

He doesn't think it will significantly boost the speed of current PC games, though. "They might run a handful of per cent faster, but I don't think that gaming will be a great reason to upgrade," he predicts.

Games written with PCI Express in mind, however, will demonstrate the benefits. "Developers who take advantage of the very high upstream bandwidth will be able to do things previous games would never have dared," Huddy reckons. "I can imagine situations where the complex and time-consuming mathematics needed for accurate fluid simulations will start to influence gameplay. It's possible that, say, water can actually start to play a much greater role in games. Developers could simulate ocean waves which move things accurately, floods that possess impressive local detail in the flow and other sorts of similar fluid-based effects which are totally impractical today."

PCI Express is not just about speeding up graphics. As a fully fledged system bus, any component built to use the connections will gain the benefits of the wider bandwidth. **Adam Foat**, nVidia's UK product manager, reckons it marks one of the biggest transitions for PC industry. "Whether people are converting music to digital formats, working with digital video or photographs or gaming, PCI Express will let them take full advantage of the processing power available in new PCs," he says.

The first PCI Express-enabled PCs are expected to start shipping in the summer. Intel will be supporting the technology in its new chipset, codenamed Grantsdale, while both ATI and nVidia will incorporate it in their new wave of graphics cards.

Thinking outside the box

One interesting application of the PCI Express specification is the way it will allow PC builders to create computers with more interesting shapes and form factors. A new card standard from the PCMCIA industry group is supporting this process. Codenamed NEWCARD, it will enable sealed-system components, where graphics or sound cards are completely contained within a box. As well as making them more reliable, it will make swapping internal PC components as easy as is currently the case with external USB devices when combined with the PCI Express hot plug-and-play capabilities. This should result in thinner laptops and smaller desktop PCs.

OUT THERE

REPORTAGE



Who would've thought that, in such an internet-driven climate, paper productions like '1-Up' could still exist?











A scene of normal gaming life from a war zone: Iraqis playing *Counter-Strike* and *Medal Of Honor*

01 1-UP #3: extra life

US: Some time ago, Out There featured issue one of a US videogame fanzine called '1-Up'. The 'zine's selling points were clear: it was an independent, self-published artifact dealing with videogames; it chose passionate, anecdotal writing over the news-to-previews-to-reviews-to-close format that all gaming publications have followed since the year dot, and, despite maintaining the traditional fanzine staple-bound format, it was utterly, utterly cool. We couldn't imagine a better piece of work, nor a neater counterpoint to the majority of videogame journalism.

It turns out that we're fallible, and we were wrong, because issue three of '1-Up' is simply stupendous, outdoing its previous iterations in every conceivable way. It doesn't just set new standards for gaming fanzines – properly bound and intricately constructed on high-quality (squared) paper, it raises the bar for videogame magazines in general. Above that, it is equal parts intelligent and beautiful and, since if you paid for *this* magazine, it's likely those qualities inform your buying decisions, you should go to www.1up-zine.com and order a copy immediately. At $13, it's not cheap, but, hey, the best things in life rarely are.

02 Wargames

Iraq: The Middle East has always been a long way away, and its people always distant. If the unavoidable 24-hour rolling footage of post-war bombs, blood, and bewildered civilians in Iraq desensitises us to violence – and we'd suggest it does this much more than, say, a red bitmap on the street in *Grand Theft Auto* – then the weblogs from the country have done the opposite, making the everyday life of its citizens more stark, more real, more personal. The Healing Iraq blog offers a conciliatory take on the situation, mixing politics with minutiae, and often provides much more revealing commentary than some of the western press. Particularly relevant to these pages, though, are UK-born Zeyad's photographs of the Iraqi gaming scene, showing some of Baghdad's LAN cafes and gaming centres, where Iraqis indulge in *Counter-Strike*, *Medal Of Honor* and *Winning Eleven*. Read (and see) more here: healingiraq.blogspot.com

Soundbytes

"The events in Half Life 2 occur right after the events in half-life… New game moves, new possibilities, new artificial intelligence… to continue would be endless."
A translation of the blurb on the back of the Ukranian pirated *Half-Life 2* box, now on sale in less-than-reputable game shops for under $6.

"Certainly many gamers read my column as a statement that I believe that they are bad people. For that impression I am sorry."
Bill France, a columnist on Heraldnet.com – whose anti-gaming piece kickstarted Penny Arcade's Child's Play campaign – gets humble.

"We basically won 2003 and moved ourselves to the number two spot… Year-on-year we were up 68.5 per cent… We sold about 1.1 million GameCubes in December. For the whole year we were up 35 per cent. Our competitors were both in the negative."
Nintendo's Perri Kaplan manipulates some carefully chosen statistics to her advantage. Nintendo fans whoop. Microsoft fans jeer.

03 Mean beanbag machine

Japan: Puzzle games are a pain in the arse because the well-loved genre can prove dangerously addictive, to the point that players can stare at the same set of falling blocks for days at a time. There's no chance to pause and have a well-earned blink or a rest for your numb behind, either, because once you're in the zone you either stay there or sacrifice your high score.

Except that Sega, displaying the same economic rationale that led to the global success of the Dreamcast, has solved the latter with the production of a *Puyo Pop Fever* beanbag, created to commemorate the release of the latest version of its blobby challenge. The only problem? Those wishing to play the game as Sega intended – slumped on a green piece of gaming tat – will have to order their copies of the game through Sega's Japan-only D-Direct service. You can but try at segadirect.jp

04 Halo amour

US: **Edge**'s affection for *Halo* is well documented, but there are some shows of dedication that surprise even this infatuated publication. While the magazine isn't saying it has never *considered* cosplay, its staffers fancy themselves more as *Street Fighter* characters because *Halo* outfits are just a bit anonymous, and since Nightmare Armour's impressively accurate suit retails for only $3,500, it does seem a little over the top. Still, if anyone out there does fancy trying it, we'd love to see the photos.

The kit can be bought in any of *Halo*'s multiplayer colours (or even unpainted, if you're really particular about your shade of fuscia), or in separate parts if all you've ever wanted is Master Chief's shiny helmet. Again, we would love to see pictures – find out more at www.nightmarearmor.com/index.html

05 Baack to the future

Germany: While Mr Minter busies himself with hippy-dippy textures and beat-mapped bump-mapping, a new generation of homebrew heroes are busy making themselves in his image. Or rather making their games in his image. PD ROMs, a German website devoted to providing legal ROM files for the emulation scene, is running a coding competition for which competitors must produce a *Llamatron* clone. Given that *Llamatron* is itself a loving tribute to *Robotron*, we presume the game's distinctive qualities – psychedelia and South American camelids – will make it into the entries intact, which should make for some interesting results. Games will be for Game Boy Advance, Game Boy, GP32, Neo-Geo Pocket or Dreamcast, and while the competition will be almost over by the time you read this, entries will ultimately be available to download from www.pdroms.de



Puzzle games can be drawn-out affairs. Why not ally your game of choice with some matching buttock comfort?





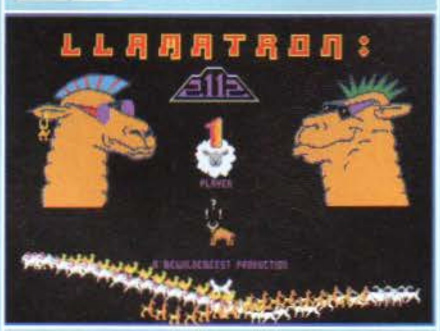


It has to be green for the sake of authenticity, of course, but you can spray your own any colour you like. Nice

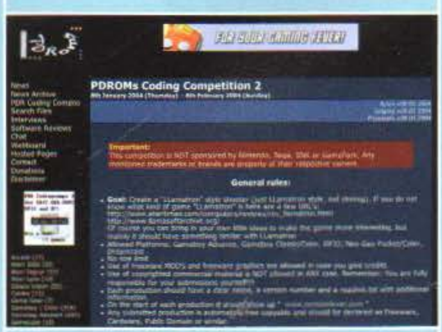


Functioning helmet lights are just two of the reasons why Nightmare Armour's *Halo* gear is so expensive





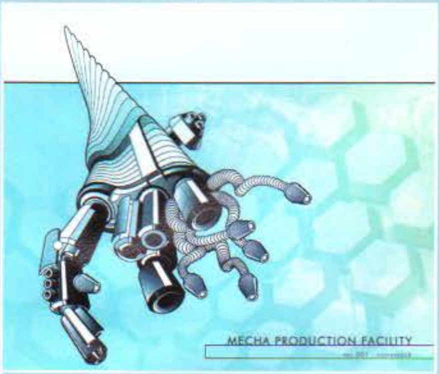
Clones of clones... It was bound to happen, of course. We'd prefer a competition inspired by *Unity*, though







We're never too big to apologise. We got it wrong. We're sorry. It's www.mech-a.com with a hyphen



The Mecha Production Facility website is certainly clean, but as it stands it's missing a little functionality

06 What a mistake-a to mech-a

UK: Last month's Out There featured a battalion of beautiful Japanese robot toys courtesy of Sami Khan's Mecha Production Facility. We urged you to visit his site and purchase some mecha merchandise for yourself. Unfortunately, we printed the wrong URL. You should have been directing your browsers towards www.mech-a.com (note crucial hyphen), where Khan is running a prize draw to win a limited-edition Luke Skywalker Kubrick figure. This rare carded figure was only ever sold at the Kyoto National Museum and is therefore as desirable as Scarlett Johanssen's peach pants. You'll also get a free mini-figure or Kubrick toy with any purchase from www.mech-a.com over £39.



"I'm only doing this because my Littlewoods catalogue work fell through. No, really, honest. Hey, it's the truth!"



Dave's choice of apparel – a *Sensible Soccer* T-shirt – had a hypnotising effect on the twin robot droids

07 Happy birthday, Mr Invader

UK: It's 25 long years since *Space Invaders*. Goodness, it only feels like yesterday, you don't know you're born, we remember when all this was pixellated cathode-ray fields, etc, etc. So why not help Taito celebrate the game's anniversary by buying a Joystick Junkies branded T-shirt? 'An initial range of exclusive streetwear clothing based on the classic green aliens will be rolling out across fashion shows and retail stores from as early as January 2004,' says the overexcited press release. 'The first range includes printed male and female tops, but will soon be expanded,' it continues, leading us to wonder what's yet to come. Boxer shorts with a turret and a tasteful thong featuring a mystery ship, we reckon. And demand royalties, too. Call Joystick Junkies on 020 8960 8606 to talk them into it, or at least to enquire where you can buy one of its £25 Ts.



The white Xbox, along with its blue counterpart below, will only be available in Japan – at least for now





08 The colour of money

Japan: It's taken a while, but it looks like Microsoft might finally have discovered the reason for Xbox's abject failure in the east. It's all in the colour. See, Nintendo has loads of colours, and Xbox doesn't – so that's it, obviously. Microsoft isn't holding back on the spray-paints any longer, as the Xbox 'Kasumi-chan Blue' celebrates the launch of *Dead Or Alive Online*, while the Xbox 'Pure White Limited' is, well, just pure white for the sake of kicking Miyamoto and company's backsides, we presume. Possibly coming soon: 'Xbox Desperate Yellow', shortly to be followed by 'Xbox Still-Selling-Bugger-All Crimson'.

Continue

Boutique publishing
Design matters. Buy '1-Up', and see why

Konami
If *Silent Hill 4* is anything like its party, it'll be great. And really drunk

Takara's dream machine
Virtual reality for sleepy-heads. We want one

Quit

US developer closures
Black Isle, now Legend. It's just like the UK, only further away

Mario Kart: Double Dash!!
We gave it another chance. It was still average. Sorry

Lego's massive losses
Can people please start buying it again? It's really good, honest

09 Changing Planes

It's often said that the subtext of utopian novels is the present state of their writer's world: see Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels' or Bacon's 'New Atlantis'. Sci-fi's grand dame Ursula Le Guin's latest book refutes such subconscious metaphor, however. 'Changing Planes' is an overt attempt to place some of the world's proclivities into sharp focus. Ostensibly trailed as a guide to worlds beyond our own, it is in fact an opportunity for Le Guin to have fun inventing alternative planes in which some of the implications of extreme human behaviour are examined.

Take Islac, a plane on which rabid genetic engineering has resulted in a race of teddy bears that eat the glue of book binding and others who are reduced to second-class citizens because their DNA is four per cent maize. Travellers to Asonu find its adult inhabitants completely silent, whereas on another plane, the lives of the Veksi consist of constant hand-to-hand combat. It is rare for them to die of natural causes. Few travellers stay long on Nna Mmoy – it's so safe it quickly gets boring.

Perhaps the most amusing construction is Le Guin's method of such inter-plane movement. Mindful of the increasingly fraught nature of terrestrial air travel – even before aircraft became weapons of terrorism – Le Guin has her pioneer Sita Dulip of Cincinnati slip into inter-plane travel because, being delayed at Chicago's O'Hare airport, she literally was already 'between planes'. A bit of a pun maybe, but such gentle intelligence sets the mood of this short collection, which is well worth reading.

10 Twisty Little Passages

Interactive Fiction, or IF as it's known to aficionados, has a chequered history, and partly that's the reason for the title of Nick Montfort's book. The other relates to *Adventure*, the first text game. Taking its cue from creator William Crowther's interest in D&D, meshed with his extensive caving experience, *Adventure* placed the player in an underground system of mazes and caves – the aforementioned twisty little passages – in which they had to find treasure and avoid miscreants such as the thieving bearded pirate. Such a sophisticated piece of software didn't just appear, however. It drew on years of academic research, notably into breaking down language into a form computers understand.

The high point of the genre swiftly followed with *Zork*, the seminal text adventure developed by MIT students who went on to set up developer Infocom. Formed in 1979, within five years it had a turnover of $10m and employed over one hundred people. The crash happened even quicker. With the introduction of computer graphics, text adventures became old hat; a problem compounded by Infocom's disastrous expansion into database software. Monfort dates the end of the commercial text adventure with the recently departed Legend's 1993 *Gateway II*.

The major problem of this well-researched book is that for Montfort we have reached a full stop. While hardcore IF fans continue to modify old games and work on new natural language parsers, he doesn't regard any computer game post-'93 as having any merit in the interaction fiction stakes. It's not a state of mind with which players of any Japanese RPG could agree.

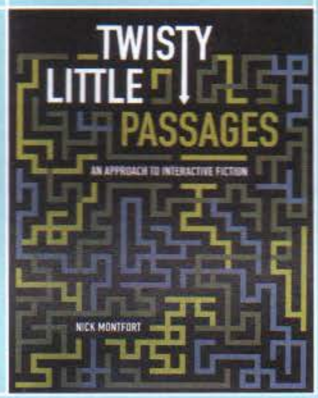
09

Author: Ursula le Guin
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07564 3



10

Author: Nick Montford
Publisher: MIT
ISBN: 0 262 13436 5



11



Site: **The ultimate Space Invaders shrine**
URL: **www.spaceinvaders.de/**

11 Website of the month

Built for those nostalgic for that time 25 years ago when 'shoot 'em up' meant one game and one game alone (see earlier), the ultimate *Space Invaders* shrine is a neat, compact look at the history of the game. That is all. It has screenshots, flyers, cabinet pictures, scans of manuals. It has tips and tricks for the game and its sequel. It has wallpaper, a screensaver, sound samples and a RealAudio copy of the *Space Invaders* song. It has several Java versions of the game, and a short history of its development. It does not contain much except for *Space Invaders*, certainly, but if having a focus is a crime, well, just declare this site guilty and bookmark the majority of the sprawling, directionless internet instead.

12 Advertainment

Japan: *Pokémon* is back in Japan with *Fire Red* and *Leaf Green*, and Nintendo has chosen to promote them with an advert pushing home the message about the new GBA wireless adapter and multiplayer features…



The ad opens with a jungle scene. The sound of a GBA being switched on comes through the trees



The sound of the wind rises, along with the noise made by our friend Bulbasaur making his attack



"Let's hit the road again with these *Pokémons* in a whole new adventure," says the voiceover…



…as the windy creature blows away the foliage to reveal the screen of a GBA, playing the new game



Scenes from the game are now shown. We see some creature trading, a bit of discovery, and…



…the main event, as a multiplayer contest is fought out, complete with flashy special attack graphics



"*Pokémon Fire Red* and *Leaf Green*," booms the voiceover. "Wireless adapter now included"



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Two screens good?

It's elementary school math. If one of something is good, then two of something is better. Work it through. If Johnny has one ice cream, and Suzy has two ice creams, then Suzy is happier, right up until she gets older and into a high school weight-shame spiral inspired by her peers who say: "Girlfriend, you cannot just, like, eat two ice creams! What would Johnny Football-hero think? He would be so over you in, like, a flash!" So, yeah, bad example, but the point is that more is more is better. Right?

Right. Like the Saturn. Realising that the system's 32bit processor was hopelessly underpowered next to Sony's PlayStation, Sega had a moment of epiphanal clarity, and it put in another! Brilliant, infallible, unstoppable. So its machine had two CPUs, Sony's had one, everyone *knew* that two was better than one from ice cream experiences, and the Saturn went on to dominate. The Dreamcast, too, and Nagoshi was knighted while RedEye married Mizugu… Worse example. Let RedEye rethink.

And while he does, let's look at the art of the press release, as delivered by Nintendo with regard to its Nintendo DS, an apparent attempt to show 1+1=2 and recapture the glory days of the Virtual Boy. The Nintendo DS is a new handheld system which takes the simple logic detailed above and applies it to the Game Boy. Namely: if one screen is good, then two will be twice as good. And if Nintendo has managed to create a monopoly with a device with one screen, then (oh God oh God) just imagine the revenue from a device with two…

The release says that the Nintendo DS (working title) will provide an 'unprecedented approach to video game play,' and RedEye will not argue with that. Here are some more approaches to videogame play that are equally unprecedented. A handheld gaming system that has no screen! A handheld gaming system that has three screens! A handheld gaming system that calls you a bastard and punches you in the face when you press start! All unprecedented, all magical. It continues: 'Players can look forward to being able to manage their game progress from two different perspectives, enhancing both the speed and strategy of the challenge.' Players have had the opportunity to manage their game progress from different perspectives before, albeit in parochial, little-known software like, ooh, *Super Mario 64* (hit a button, see things through the eyes of the protagonist), and *Super Mario Kart* (glance at the bottom of the screen and watch a REALTIME map). Still, this way enhances both the speed *and* the strategy of the challenge. RedEye isn't sure what that means, but it sounds ace.

'For example in a soccer game, users can view the whole game on one screen while simultaneously focusing on an individual player's tackle or goal on the other.' Maybe some readers can help RedEye out here, because he can't think of a single reason why you'd want to. Don't think about it too hard, though, because it's quite irrelevant next to the word buried in the middle there. *Simultaneously*? Watching one screen, while focusing on another? Christ, as if it hadn't brought the world enough optical terror with Gumpei Yokoi's red/black baby.

'Players will no longer be forced to interrupt game play to shift perspective such as moving from a wide shot to a close up' – when were we ever forced to do that? This is just creative writing now, though RedEye quite enjoys the idea of tearful gamers being told, at gunpoint, to pause their games before hitting the change view button in *Virtua Racing* and a million titles since. RedEye also enjoys the idea that Nintendo is ushering in a brave new era, where everyone can switch viewpoint without fearing the perspective police – 'or alternating between a character's ongoing battle and a map of the environment.' Like a boxed-off map in the corner of the screen, you mean? Neat.

"It is such a brave, barrel-scraping boast that you wonder why they didn't patent Realtime Ocular Movement as a Nintendo concept"

Here's the killer, though, the device summed up in a soundbyte: 'Nintendo DS makes it possible to perform the tasks in realtime by simply glancing from one screen to the other.' It is such a brave, barrel-scraping boast that you wonder why they didn't patent Realtime Ocular Movement as a Nintendo concept. Simply by *looking somewhere else* you can *see something else*. Shorn of the imagination to actually innovate, they've just doubled their components and told you you'll be doubling your pleasure, and they're expecting you to buy into it.

As if realising the mediocrity – no, worse, the absolute nothingness – of its statements thus far, the press release makes one final scamble for credibility. 'Today's announcement is but a glimpse of the additional features and benefits that will be shown in full at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles in May,' it says. But a glimpse. Roll up and speculate away, because you won't believe what they're going to show you. A glimpse, like a carnival salesman hawking special benefits that will never come, Nintendo is reduced to a sideshow, shouting about snake oil.

RedEye knows you know that two isn't better than one, and he doesn't really think that Nintendo thinks it is either, but this is innovation as desperation, creating something new just for the sake of saying it's unique. The link-up between the Cube and GBA sounded so good on paper but, while games like *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*, *The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords*, and *Pac-Man Vs* have produced cute, new experiences, they're not furthering Nintendo's forays into the mainstream, just pandering to their fans and collectors of curios.

And if that's what happens to something of idle interest, how can something as ridiculous in concept as the DS not be a disaster on the scale of the N-Gage? RedEye isn't a prophet. He'd love to be proved wrong. But he's checked his working, and… well, hey. You do the math.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

Maybe it's just the gloomy new year skies under which I am writing this, but sometimes I just can't take videogames seriously. I don't mean, dear readers, that I experience physical difficulty in reaching up to stroke my beard – I mean that they seem totally ridiculous, even stupid. If you consider some of today's apparently most sophisticated games with a kind of mental squint it's a wonder that anybody spends any time on them at all.

There are currently posters for *Max Payne 2* everywhere in our cities (and in European capitals too). These posters are cunningly designed to look, at first glance, as though they are advertising a film. Friends of mine are surprised when I point one out and tell them it's a videogame. "Wow," they say, "it looks really noir, really cool, really grown-up." At which point I haven't the heart to explain that it's all about rolling around in



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Questioning the rules

warehouses, shooting people in slow motion while a voiceover delivers ever more ridiculous sub-Chandler similes. ("It's like looking down into the grave of your love" – what is that like, then, exactly? There is a fine line between parody and mere literary incompetence.) Why does Max bother calling for NYPD backup only to then immediately run alone into warehouses filled with enemies anyway? Why can't I go *there*? Why does Max look so stupid when he jumps? Why can he only carry eight painkillers at a time?

The best people at asking these sorts of 'why?' questions are people who don't normally play games – who don't unquestioningly swallow every bizarre paradigm that has been foisted upon us by unscrupulous developers over the years. In this respect, I would almost want to say that the non-gamer is never wrong. Of course, there will always be a priori parameters of a game that the initiate must just accept – for example, if you are explaining the rules of chess to someone, they just have to accept that a knight moves like this and a bishop moves like that. In this situation, asking 'why?' is hardly productive.

However, such unquestionable parameters in a videogame system, I suggest, do not extend much beyond the control interface and the rules of success or survival. Everything else is up for grabs and instead of taking everything mutely on trust, we should always be allowed to ask: 'Does this make sense?' The tension in *Max Payne 2* between a pseudo-naturalistic narrative style and a set of arbitrary mechanical conventions is something that has become, over time, almost invisible to the habitual gamer but immediately obvious – and rightly troubling – to the novice.

Compare the experience of the EyeToy, where there are no immediate 'why?' questions that spring to mind. Obviously, punching the little martial artists makes them go away. Obviously, ducking under the ball makes it bounce off your head. This kind of stuff is all familiar from real life (except, just maybe, the three-inch-high kung-fu fighters). Now in a sense it may be unreasonable to compare the party-game delights of EyeToy with a high-budget 'cinematic' extravaganza such as *Max Payne 2*. One could argue that EyeToy is thoroughly successful only because it is attempting so much less, but it is not unreasonable to imagine, or at least to dream about, a large-scale adventure with the immediacy of interaction and the seamless logic of an EyeToy game. *Ico* was nearly there, but not quite. (In fact, a non-habitual gamer who is playing *Ico* for research purposes shocked me the other day by going into a rant about how much he hated the annoying Yorda. I was taken aback at this but, after a while, I could see his point. The fact that she is sometimes helpful does not alter the fact that she is often a hindrance.) If this industry is going to continue to expand, that has to be part of the future.

"I spend a full 15 minutes throwing a chair at a friendly character's head, only to receive a handful of scripted peevish complaints in return"

So far, unfortunately, it seems to be a rule in videogames that every advance in naturalism brings with it new absurdities. The fact that every object in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, for instance, can be picked up and chucked around and will behave according to simulated physics just makes it appear all the more silly when I spend a full 15 minutes throwing a chair at a friendly character's head, only to receive a handful of scripted peevish complaints in return. (Clearly, the developer half expected that people would try this sort of thing, but seem to have underestimated my grimly perverse determination to keep going until it entirely shattered the illusion of character in the game world.)

Invisible War also initially suffered from the absurdity that it took several bullets in the head from a handgun to kill an enemy. This, as Warren Spector explained in a pre-release interview, was a deliberate design decision: he wanted players to play the game in a different way, to do something other than run around taking headshots.

Well, in response to such manifest absurdity and to the ludicrous vision of Daddy Designer trying to tell us how and how not to negotiate what was supposedly an open-ended adventure, the entire gaming community shouted 'why?' – and, sure enough, in the version 1.1 patch, the developer had, among other things, "increased the headshot damage multiplier for the pistol."

Thanks, dudes.

This is an excellent example of community pester power, of which I think we should all take advantage more often. Let's try to look at our games through innocent eyes and remind ourselves exactly what we are being asked to swallow. Not because we have forgotten that games are supposed to be fun but, on the contrary, because we want them to be more fun.

And this is not a bad habit for a designer (like any artist) to get into, either, if you're constantly interrogating the work and seeing if, so to speak, it can defend itself. In fact, gamers and developers equally should all be like small children pestering their parents, demanding 'why?' repeatedly, never satisfied with an argument appealing to mere convention.

That way progress lies.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com

BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

Over and over and over again

You've all heard of Stockholm Syndrome, right? It isn't a swelling of the wrist from downloading vast amounts of Swedish art photography, but a psychological condition coined after a 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, when four employees bonded with their captors.

Despite being held in a vault for six days and being subjected to extreme physical and verbal abuse, the captives developed an affection for the captors to the point where they even feared their own rescue. There have been other examples, with hostages French-kissing their kidnappers upon release, baking cakes for them and making 'Thank You For Holding Us Hostage' cards.

While that's all very jolly and interesting, cynics have suggested that a form of Stockholm Syndrome causes us to hang on to destructive relationships far longer than we should – how even after things have got really bad, and she's started deliberately farting on your washing and burning effigies of you in the front garden, you somehow still can't bring yourself to split up.

These examples illustrate that I now realise there is one relationship I've been hanging on to for far longer than I should. I have accepted that I've fallen out of love with platform games – and it's all the fault of that wanton hussy Yuji Naka for trying to force his pungent eggs down my throat.

If his *Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg* was anything other than a videogame, it would be a straw – a 50-ton iron straw, and right now it would be resting atop my poor dead camel, Ali Osman, whose vertebrae are shattered into a million pitiful pieces (apologies to Jeff Minter if that analogy has set you weeping into your woollen lap).

Frankly, my dears, I don't give a damn about platform games any more. It wasn't so much the repetitive simplicity of *Hatcher*'s levels (I doubt it's a coincidence that 'Hatcher' sounds a bit like 'Hitler' – for they are unequalled in their parallel evil), or the frustrating way the game seemed to conspire against you. It wasn't even the dull, 32bit-style graphics. It was the fact that – giant egg rolling aside – it was the same old thing we've all seen a billion times before. And yeah, we've all heard this argument before, I know, but this time it's different. You see, *Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg* was to be a return to form for the once-proud platform powerhouse that is Sonic Team. It was going to establish the characters as icons and reinvigorate the genre, not to mention Sega's fortunes.

Instead, we got familiar pirate levels, and snow and ice levels, and lava levels, and jungle levels. There were switches to bounce on, and crates aplenty to smash, and bits where you roll down long slides. There were uninspiring bosses who were defeated in the usual ways, and *Pokémon*-esque creatures to gather, and – for the love of Jesus H Corbett – coins to collect! How often are these flaccid clichés going to be paraded before us? Are these developers oblivious to the fact that they're feasting upon the rancid corpses of a billion other games? Do they just not care? Where is their dignity? Where is their lust?

Imagination is our only defence in the war against reality, but if it were down to Sonic Team and their ilk we'd have fought World War II using balloons on sticks with the faces of Douglas Bader and Winston Churchill painted on them. Playing modern platform games is like being stuck in a recurring dream where you writhe about on a greased bouncy castle with the girl of your dreams. It's fun at first, but after the 50th night you'd probably rather be dreaming about Darth Vader eating marzipan, or something.

"Are these developers oblivious to the fact that they're feasting upon the rancid corpses of a billion other games? Do they just not care?"

This time last year I was venting similarly flavoured bile in the direction of the risible *Starfox Adventures* (a roleplaying-ish game dressed in tedious platform game clichés). Seriously, friends, it's gone beyond a joke now – the bottom of the barrel is no longer being scraped. We've broken through the planks to the ground beneath and, jeepers, is that tough on the old fingernails.

The point is, you expect something better from a studio with Sonic Team's reputation (though I'd dispute that its track record actually justifies that esteem, but that's a debate for another time). A videogame begins as a blank canvas, and there are a trillion chances to do something different, unique and wonderful. Even within the platform genre there are infinite ideas we've never seen before. Instead, those responsible for *Billy Hatcher* chose to crib from their own memories rather than use it as an opportunity to be a bit different.

If you ever see an eight-year-old in the woods (as I often do from my camouflaged hide), they pick up sticks and use them as guns, or swords, or atrophied limbs. You can't help but ponder if Sonic Team would use those same bits of wood for a game of Branch Collectors and Twig Hunters: "Look at me, Naka-san! I am the branch collector, Mr Woods, and I'm going to pretend this gnarled bit of bark is a type of gnarled bark!"

Oscar Wilde, God rest his pert little bottom, once said: "Consistency is the last resort of the unimaginative." Lordy, platform games have been consistently dull for a decade now. The most depressing realisation is that it's many of the pioneers of the platform genre who are the worst culprits. Sega being one, obviously, while Nintendo hasn't produced a truly original platform game in God knows how long. Let's not even get started on Rare. It's doubly depressing to realise that, where once the platform game ruled the charts, it's now a rare occasion one even makes a dent. Is it any wonder when the only distinguishing feature is the animal the main character is based on?

Pertinently, it's the ones that do things a bit differently which perform the best. Vivendi's *Crash Bandicoot* continues to be a cash cow for the company, while *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* has been a similar success by literally turning many platform game conventions on their head. Lord knows how big *Viewtiful Joe* could've been if it hadn't been a GameCube exclusive.

Why should I be bothered if derivative games get their just desserts? Because it's as frustrating as watching a hen sit around eating crisps rather than using its wings to soar in the sky. Nobody likes to watch an idiot squander his talents, man.

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

Edge's most wanted

Thief: Deadly Shadows

Invisible War may have tantalised and frustrated in equal measure, but *Deadly Shadows* promises freedom and flexibility within tight, intriguing restraints.



(PC/Xbox) Eidos

The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords

The DS announcement makes **Edge** all the keener to sample the cream of Nintendo's in-house double-screened gaming ideas. And it looks just peachy.



(GameCube) Nintendo

Driv3r

The trailers might be from Ridley Scott's studio and not the man himself, but they are jump-starting excitement for the return of the cop chase franchise.



(PS2/Xbox) Atari

Far Cry

Never before has a game had such a tropical atmosphere that you can feel the sweat. By now you should have played the demo and joined the junglists.



PC (Ubisoft)

The battle for hearts and minds

What will games invade next?

War – huuh – what is it good for? Not a question that game publishers need to ask themselves at the moment, because war is doing just fine for them. With *Medal Of Honor: Rising Sun* installed at the top of the charts over Christmas, households across the country will have been contemplating the birth of Christ to the accompaniment of machine-gun fire. Last year, World War Two, with its myriad conflicts taking in north Africa, the Pacific and the Battle of Britain, was the conflict in vogue. This year, with *Battlefield: Vietnam* and *ShellShock* on the horizon, the wargame zeitgeist has shifted towards south-east Asia. Undoubtedly the Vietnam war, with its fleets of Hueys throbbing over burning jungle while pilled-up GIs surf up the coast in a haze of '60s counter-culture rebellion, was the coolest war of them all. That, however, is only if you're watching 'Apocalypse Now', and not, presumably, if you were actually there.

In the last issue, we fingered war-based games as a continuing trend for 2004, but can war ever be a trend? It's worrying how easily we can glibly reduce historical atrocities to fashion statements. *ShellShock* in particular seems to derive kudos from the fact that torture and crucifixion are a part of its oeuvre. Then again, at least Guerrilla is trying to play down any heroic elements of its game, aiming for a kind of moral ambivalence that better illustrates the panic and confusion of conflict.

So if Vietnam is currently regarded as 'hip', is there anywhere developers won't go? As the *Conflict: Desert Storm* games have proved, Gulf War One is fair game, but the more recent Iraq invasion is off limits (too political, as if all wars aren't). World War Two games are strangely lacking a Dresden firebombing or an Enola Gay nuclear bombing mission. Massacring people in a historical situation by rifle or cannon is fine, but the H-bomb is taboo.

OK, back to reality. Wargames have existed for a very long time. Videogaming is a medium especially suited to them, and even some of the pacifists who marched on London in protest at the Iraq invasion last year enjoy a spot of *Allied Assault*. It doesn't mean you want to sign up for the real thing (unless the game is *America's Army*, obviously). So while we're mining past conflicts for the purposes of gaming, it shouldn't be difficult to bear in mind what happened in real life in order that such entertainment might exist. Good God, y'all.













Star Wars Battlefront

A long time ago (last week) in a galaxy far far away (Texas), we gave in to a genuine 'Star Wars' addiction



There's an impressive sense of scale on show. AT-ST walkers tower above the grunts, a terrifying prospect for the Rebel Alliance. Imagine how big an AT-AT feels compared to your little trooper



You join us 60 feet above the ground, racing across the white plains of Hoth in a snowspeeder at a speed measured somewhere between 'fast' and 'oh, cripes.' We're curious to discover quite how *Star Wars Battlefront*, LucasArts' own take on the *Battlefield: 1942* formula, will play out.

With no preview code available, we've taken to toying with *Galactic Conquest*, a *BF: 1942* mod that lifts its core ideas directly from the 'Star Wars' franchise. Only two years ago, this would have resulted in a stern phone call from the Lucas lawyers and a cease-and-desist letter. No longer. Now, the *Galactic Conquest* team enjoys hosting on Lucasarts' own file servers and the chance to use the John Williams score in its publicity material.

"The basic template for Battlefront is simple: combine 'Star Wars' with BF:1942 in the most ambitious console firstperson shooter yet"



Above and top left are screens from the PC version, with PS2 shots in the centre and the right populated with Xbox graphics

The time has come for LucasArts to take advantage of the rabid following that's grown up around the under-resourced and under-achieving mod with its own take on *Battlefield: 1942*. While the ambition of the *Galactic Conquest* team is admirable, it pales into insignificance when compared with the scale of LucasArts' own vision. The basic template for *Battlefront* is simple: combine the geek fascination of 'Star Wars' with the comedic lunacy of *BF: 1942*, in the most ambitious console firstperson shooter yet. The primary interest will lie in the direction LucasArts is pushing online gaming, with a massively multiplayer mode for *Battlefront* that shares a moniker with a certain mod.

In the Galactic Conquest mode the universe is divided into discrete sections, and then split evenly between the Imperial and Rebel or Republic and Separatist forces. Simple, one-off skirmishes over territory are fought by 32 players per server. The winning side chooses the next scenario and may get certain tactical advantages – if the Republic players hold the cloning facilities on Kamino they gain a faster respawn time, while the Separatist forces receive a similar bonus for owning the droid forges on Geonosis.

Those advantages are at their most spectacular when combined with NPCs. The online hoards will be joined by a selection of familiar characters, tipping the balance of a conflict. For instance, the advantage of holding Tatooine as the Empire is the ability to call upon Darth Vader to plough a path of destruction through the Rebel forces. If Rebel snipers are whittling the stormtroopers down, players can enlist the asthmatic one as a force-enabled riot shield. The addition of neutral races should add a further frisson to online play – Lucasarts is already promising that Tusken Raiders will roam the deserts of Tatooine attacking anyone they come into contact with, while a Sarlaac pit will lash out at anyone who comes too close. On Endor, where the Rebels are at a natural disadvantage, the Ewoks will proffer their services, stealing speeder bikes from the Imperial outposts whenever they can.

It's the vehicles, and their perfectly balanced twitchy arcade handling, that are the key to *Battlefield: 1942*'s success, and LucasArts is offering vehicles from both the

Format: **PC, Xbox, PS2**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **LucasArts/Pandemic**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Autumn 2004**








Levels available include battles, planets, vehicles and races from both the original trilogy and the new-fangled prequels. Occupying a planet may bring specific tactical advantages to your faction




Each player faction will be able to choose from at least four classes per map, including officers, pilots, commandos and scouts

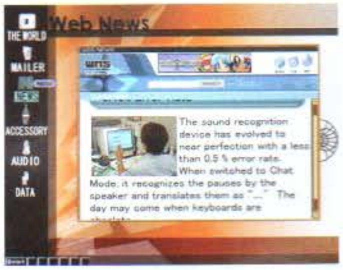
original trilogy and its prequels. Notable examples include the wet-dream AT-STs and AT-ATs, a selection of starfighters including X-Wings and the Republic's gunship from Episode Two, replete with four gun turrets that can be crewed independently.

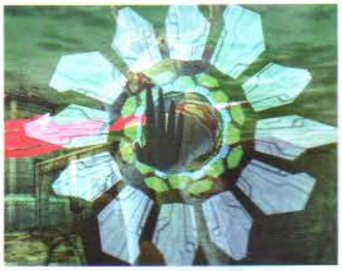
This use of prequel material allows LucasArts to flesh out some of the technology – for instance the Republic's commandos will be given jetpacks on Naboo, allowing fleet-footed players to bound from building to building, raining blaster fire from the skies. In the meantime, the opposing team will be staffed entirely by droids, and one class will be the Driodikas, walking gun turrets that can collapse into a sphere, rolling around at high speed. Expect a *Super Droidika Ball* mod in minutes, made possible on the PC by a selection of toolkits and level editors from LucasArts. Console owners can expect online play through Xbox Live and Sony's own network service. For lone players, full battles can be played against bots, with the human player issuing local commands through single button presses. The Galactic Conquest mode will bring a sense of continuity missing from *BF: 1942*'s singleplayer effort.

We return to an **Edge** now thoroughly besotted with the concept of a professionally produced 'Star Wars' version of *BF: 1942*. Yet LucasArts appears determined to leave its own mark on the genre. We pray that the online technology can keep pace with the company's aspirations.

.hack

Infection, Mutation, Outbreak and Quarantine – Bandai's virtual virtual world crosses media boundaries and looks intriguing





The desktop (top) allows access to news sites, email and *The World* (below), which can be launched like any other application

The bilingual press conference is a curious thing. First there's the Japanese developer giving a sincere speech to an audience who nod out of politeness, but who understand little more than appropriated english keywords like 'internet' and 'DVD' and 'multimedia'. Then there's the translator, who struggles with a pen and paper to catch up with the developer's speech, and punctuates the paragraph pauses with an approximate translation of the previous few sentences.

Consequently, the reactions from the crowd of journalists are split in two. The Japanese entourage gasp and sigh and giggle during the first readthrough, while the Europeans wait anxiously for the translation. It's like hearing the canned laughter 30 seconds before the joke.

Laughter. We wait. "So, you enjoy the stylish and mysterious world of *.hack*," stumbles the translator, taking his words from the mouth of Bandai's spokesman, "and I will enjoy a very tasty restaurant in London." Ah, gotcha. Laughter again, and the DVD-based presentation begins for real.

"Less mystery and more conspiracy-theory hokum perhaps, but the technological setting gives the game a neat postmodern twist"

What do we know about *.hack*? It's an RPG, not dissimilar to *Phantasy Star Online* in nature, where players level-up characters by hitting monsters of ever-increasing numerical stature. It comes in four parts, all of which have already been released in Japan and the US, and all of which will be released in Europe during 2004 under the Atari label. It's not simply about videogames, however. It's a multimedia project which spans four separate media: the game, sure, but also the TV series, the comic book, and the DVD anime. The threads in each interweave, link and tie up with the resolution in the fourth game. It is an ambitious project, but one whose payoff is clear: if consumers buy into the *.hack* world, they don't just buy a single product, but rather an entire line of storybook fragments, each designed to tease them into buying the next one.

Stylish and mysterious, though? Certainly the first. Exquisitely produced by the lead designers of 'Ghost In The Shell', 'Noir' and 'Evangelion' (to no small degree of expense: "So artistic that they missed many deadlines" – to delayed laughter) *.hack*'s aesthetic is both traditionally Japanese and exuberantly modern. Translucent layers shift silently across each other, the game's hallmark hexagons providing a wireframe filter to much of the interface. As the name suggests, it's an RPG inextricably linked with technology – more of that in a moment – and so the visuals pay homage to the same punchy, sharp graphical themes seen in 'The Matrix' and (again) *Phantasy Star Online*. While *Final Fantasy* special attacks are the gods and monsters of old, enemies here are pierced with shards of bright, jagged data, over and over again.

And it's quite mysterious, too. It takes place in a near-future world where an MMORPG called *The World* has achieved global popularity and the player takes the role of, well, a player. The short-term motivation fo the investigation is to find out why your friend, Orca, has fallen into a coma while playing the game. The long-term objective is to find out the truth behind *The World*, and presumably behind Altinet, the stable computer network which proved the only software environment immune to a destructive virus released at the



Monsters to be fought can be huge, as evidenced by this flying horned beast. The traditional RPG elements of the game can also be seen in battle mode, with hit points and damage figures





Players move from the hub world by creating portals using word combinations, like codelocks for levels. Passwords come by virtual email, so it's wise to leave *The World* every so often to check





Format: **PS2**
Publisher: **Atari**
Developer: **Bandai**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **March/Q2/Q3/Q4**













start of the 21st century. Less mystery and more conspiracy-theory hokum perhaps, but the technological setting gives the game a neat postmodern twist.

Rather then attempting to model reality, or a reality, *.hack* has to simulate a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game.

So, the frontend is an Altinet desktop, where players can do many of the things they might on their PC desktop – change the wallpaper, play in-game audio and mpeg files, check email (messages regularly arrive from the characters you meet), or do some virtual shopping for in-game items using a neat web browser.

It also allows you to launch *The World* as if it were just another application. And from *The World*'s in-game menu, you can log on to the (simulated, virtual) virtual world. And that world? Well, it's just like a videogame.

It's clever stuff, but does it work? We haven't had enough time to judge yet, but maybe it doesn't matter. If you'll allow us to opine for a moment: regardless of *.hack*'s merits as a piece of software, it's certainly an interesting comment on its host medium, and the game's multipart and multiform philosophy is a glimpse of one direction videogaming may yet take.

The cross-media narrative is enough to make its contribution to our form an interesting one, but it also verges on the episodic structure that's been promised for years now. While that could be seen as a move less grounded in the creative future of gaming and more in cynical profiteering, it's still a step towards something. A step worth taking? Possibly.

A review of the first chapter will reveal more next month.







The bright colours, futuristic fashions and pretty (but ultimately essentially flat) surroundings recall Sega's *Phantasy Star Online* – though *.hack*'s offline nature will be substantially kinder to players' phone bills

World War Zero: IronStorm

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: MC2
Developer: Rebellion
Origin: UK
Release: Q2 2004

1914-1964. The dates alone send a shiver down your spine, as Rebellion takes on last year's PC revisionist FPS









The blood splatters aren't just cosmetic, they're highly directional and respond accurately to show the direction the damage is coming from







The '60s setting adds more than just an atmosphere. As well as conventional grenades, you can be attacked with hallucinogenic mines, which leave you tripping woozily across the battlefield

Rebellion has had 14 months to finish its console conversion of *Iron Storm*, a PC FPS set in an alternate World War I (see 'That '60s show'). The luxury of time has given the developer a chance to rethink almost every aspect of the game, from character design and plot tweaks to aiming systems and weapon balancing. The result is a pleasing balance of arcade freedom and PC discipline. Carry all the weapons and ammo you want, but expect your allies to respond to friendly fire by dying messily rather than chirping "Oi! Knock it off!"

Running battles and tense trench sections play out differently as the canny AI hunts you down or cowers behind cover, but overall levels will be straightforward and linear. Rebellion hopes that hidden sub-missions, secret weapons and a high-score system will encourage players to return to the trenches again and again. Combat is satisfying, with the wide-ranging but traditional weapon set feeling heavy and powerful.

On Normal difficulty the auto-aim snaps to three different body zones – head, torso and legs – which works very well when your reticule snaps onto your target, but can prove a little frustrating when it snaps off. It's perfectly possible to turn it off, however, and higher difficulties shrink the locus of the snap or remove it completely. Aiming at the torso and legs makes each battle play out differently, as wounded troops slump to the ground before surrendering or pulling the pin from a suicidal grenade.

The creamy haze in the sky is certainly pretty, and it gives a real impression that the whole world's atmosphere has been choked with 50 years of cordite and mud. In fact, the game's main visual strength comes from its ability to make things look grubby. Spattering down over some pretty standard PS2 trenches and bunkers, the thick, grubby rain gives you something to shiver about and the film of muck that coats your sights leaves you in no doubt that you're up to your ankles in puddle of dirt and blood.

A little tuning remains. The quick-swap option for your two favoured weapons is a sound idea, but the heat of battle would be a much nicer place to be if there was some kind of fast select system for your grenades. The manual checkpoints can also be a little too sparse, although sometimes that's only because you've run past one by mistake. At its best, however, *World War Zero* should stand witness to what thoughtfulness and patience bring to console ports.

That '60 show

The premise of *World War Zero*'s alternative history is that the Russian revolution of 1917 was derailed by the megalomaniacal Baron Ugenberg, who spent the following 50 years trying to establish a pan-Asiatic state, stretching from Europe to China. The west has fought grimly on, funding their efforts by floating all their troops on the stock exchange, which means that each level you complete enhances your personal share price. It's an interesting satirical twist, and allows the designers to mix trenches and mud-slicks of WW1 with powerful modern weapons.

Battlefield: Vietnam

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **Digital Illusions**
Origin: **Sweden**
Release: **2004**

Can the peculiar sheen of the rock'n'roll butchery of Vietnam breath new life into EA's online masterpiece?

When *Battlefield: 1942* was imminent on the PC games scene, even EA was a little unsure of how it was going to be greeted. It wasn't obvious how a game that melded firstperson action with vehicular combat was going to work online. *Tribes* and its sequel had pioneered this formula, but without ever really stirring up a popular following. *Battlefield* has changed things, and its resounding success seems to have surprised and delighted everyone.

Battlefield: Vietnam is a sequel that, instead of taking a next-generation leap into the unknown, reworks the original game by slapping the template of an existing graphics engine and game dynamic over a war that's consistently popular with Hollywood action flicks. There have been some tweaks here and there, but the core game remains intact. This means that the immediacy of the original remains, but without taking advantage of any of the cutting-edge technical trickery that seems to characterise big-name PC shooters.

That will be of little concern to the addicted gamers, who simply want their dose of fast-paced combat with easy-to-use vehicles. *Battlefield: Vietnam* certainly provides that, and manages to evoke a strong sense of jungle and tropical highland combat in the process. Dense jungle, however, is not represented, and the battlefields can feel like dressed-up versions of the original, rather than actual rainforest landscapes. The swampy coastal areas are filled with waterways in which numerous boats can be employed. Watching lightly armoured speedboats blasting down channels under cover of helicopter gunships will bring back memories of one too many 'Nam films.

Of course, the game shirks realism to ensure that both sides have an equal amount of hardware to play with – the Vietnamese having Chinese tanks, as well as Russian helicopters and aircraft to bail out of across the vast maps. All of this means experienced players will be refreshed, but also totally familiar with how the game works as the standard base-capturing game types remain.

We've only yet seen an incomplete version of *Battlefield: Vietnam*, and the obvious problems were typical of games at this stage of development. More worrying, however, is whether the game will provide enough fresh content for picky PC gamers to feel satisfied with a full-price purchase. With free mods already dishing out this kind of action, it's tough to see this as much more than a glorified expansion pack.









Helicopters provide air support as well as moving troops around the game space with remarkable ease. *Battlefield* remains intuitive and fluid in play



Fighting on foot remains, while sniping is even more lethal in Vietnam with the amount of cover that these maps provide for the sneakier gamer. It's vehicles, however, that can turn the tide of a battle



Other jungle rumbles

Battlefield: 1942 has a number of talented and enthusiastic amateur makeovers. The *Desert Combat* mod has already found a place for itself in gamers' favour, alongside Vietnam mod *Eve Of Destruction* (above). It isn't bad either, and begs the question as to what developers must do to stay ahead of their fans, let alone professional rivals. *Eve Of Destruction* has ensured that PC gamers are already fighting in 'Nam for free.

Harvest Moon: It's A Wonderful Life

Format: GameCub
Publisher: Ubisof
Developer: Natsum
Origin: Japa
Release: March 1

Previously in E12

It's A Wonderful Good Life might be more accurate, as Natsume's self-sufficiency sim comes to your GameCube. Peapod brandy not included











There's an entire suite of tools which – for a price – automate processes like milking (which needs to be done twice a day) and watering. For now, though, you're stuck with a watering can (right)





Harvest Moon's simple story is tinged with melancholy. As a slightly super-deformed boy of that indeterminate Nintendo age of somewhere between eight and 18, you arrive at the farm after your father's death. A grumpy but kindly uncle figure explains that his dream was to raise a family on the land, and that you inherit his dream along with his acreage.

What that adds up to is the gentle strategy of choosing your crops, breeding your cows and cuddling your chickens. You'll need to keep an eye on the seasons and watch your livestock for signs of disease for the farm to remain profitable, and you can invest those profits in rarer types of cattle and fancier outbuildings.

However, the pace is less ruthless than earlier games in the series, and your basic watering and milking tasks will only take up a fraction of the available to you each day. It means you can spend the afternoons wandering around the rather bizarre town, riding your horse or putting in a spot of fishing. As ever, your all-consuming quest is to get yourself a wife, and you've a broad range of choices from the tarty to the demure. Indeed, the balance of the game is stacked far more towards interacting with the tramps, hippies and deranged scientists who make up your neighbours than micro-managing carrots or buying bulls and 'miracle pills' for your cows.

Visually, this isn't a game built out of the finest materials the GameCube has to offer, but the world is put together with such care and imagination that the result is a delight. The flower-lamps gleam in the cool night air, and your shadow fades in and out with delicate precision. Link up with the GBA's *Friends Of Mineral Town* and you can unlock characters within *It's A Wonderful Life*, who – in a nod to *Animal Crossing* – will visit on certain days of the week and bring with them bonuses like new recipes and records to play on your gramophone.

There's no word yet if Ubisoft will also picking up either of the feminised versions – *Friends Of Mineral Town For Girls*, and the upcoming *It's A Wonderful Life For Girls*. These differ little from the originals, but let you play as a girl, which adds a rather different dynamic to your spouse-hunting activities, and there's likely to be a greater emphasis on clothes and cookie baking.

In the meantime, *It's A Wonderful Life* should bring an even more lackadaisical pace to what has always been one of gaming's most laid-back series.

Singles: Flirt Up Your Life

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Deep Silver**
Developer: **Rotobee**
Origin: **Germany**
Release: **April**

If you were going to out-sim The Sims, what would you change? Rotobee moves it 5,000 miles east and makes it 5,000 times saucier

At first glance, you could be forgiven for thinking this was the shallowest rip-off imaginable, but there's quite literally an ocean of difference between *Singles* and the original it imitates. *The Sims*, inspired by the sitcoms and soaps of suburban America, couldn't be more at odds with the adult, European vibe of *Singles*. This, after all, is a game in which your only goal is to encourage the two flatmates you oversee to get it on – or, more likely, off.

And as the screenshots show, *Singles* doesn't shy away from much. When your singleton goes to have a bath, they run the water, take off all their clothes and lie back in the tub. What's shocking is that it's an entirely non-salacious event – there's no purring or arching or pouting. This is a world away from *Lula*, with its filthy modelling and sniggering press releases. It's all about as pornographic as a French yoghurt advert. All of that, however, is rather contradicted by the game's main event, which is all about sex. It takes some doing, but if you manage to max out all your sliders you'll gain access to the 'snog in bed' command, which will trigger some activity of the kind possibly best described as 'educational'.

There's little evidence to suggest that *Singles*' gameplay will be groundbreaking. The basics will be familiar – although your two charges have limited minds of their own, they mostly rely on your mouse clicks to remind them to eat, sleep and go to work. Invest their earnings in some nice new sofas, keep them happy with some romantic movies and you'll buy yourself enough time to have them cuddle up together and whisper sweet gobbledygook to one another.

Rotobee has taken the axe to the delicate checks and balances that make *The Sims*' mechanisms so fascinating. With a limit of two characters, and a smaller number of variables to manage, this is likely to be a much more finite game experience.

Games have a long way to go before they can successfully integrate natural sexual behaviour into their worlds – and there are quite a few questions to be answered along the way about whether or not it's even a good idea. There's no hope of making any progress at all, though, until games can at least look both male and female nudity in the eye without squealing or blushing or fainting. The sight of your singleton reclining full-frontal in the bath, utterly neutral in posture and presentation, might just prove a vital stepping stone along the way.









Conversational successes result in your characters being showered with balloons, hearts and paper doll chains. The more you succeed, the more gambits become available to you







The tone of the game is set by the wardrobe choices, which can range from bikini to underwear to naked. However, your singletons will become embarrassed if they are left undressed for too long



Sylvanian families

The European flavour of the game extends beyond sexual permissiveness. The apartment's setting feels like London, Paris and Berlin rolled into one, and each character converses in regionally accented nonsense. It's also influenced the game's visual style, which is more realistic and elegant than *The Sims*' cartoony abandon. The close-ups of their faces provide a more intimate sense of connection with your charges – rather than being user created, *Singles*' characters are fully-rounded people, with names, histories and personalities.

Sabre Wulf

Format: GBA
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Rare
Origin: UK
Release: TBC

Another classic is remade on the GBA. But will it have you howling for more?





Once Sabre Wulf gives chase the enemies and barriers disappear, leaving you with a frantic dash of desperation back to the entrance

Sir Clive's generation prepare to get excited: this looks much more an Ultimate game than a Rare one. Indeed, there's something fresh, almost bold, about the game's incredibly simple structure. Sabreman must again banish the malign Sabre Wulf by collecting the pieces of a protective amulet. Most of the plot exposition, chatting to characters and rambling will take place from an overhead perspective, but discover one of Sabre Wulf's lairs and the game shifts into familiar 2D platform territory.

Each lair, although small, will have a clear goal: steal a mission-critical object from beneath the paws of the snoozing Sabre Wulf and escape before he eats you. The journey will be littered with obstacles, each of which can be banished by employing a set of collectable, and surreal, 'animal' tools. One provides a makeshift bridge, another a trampoline, others attack enemies, which look equally bizarre, indiscriminately.

With only eight villages to explore, longevity could be a problem, but a further Challenge mode should hopefully add some length to an otherwise modest adventure.

A mix of platforming, treasure hunting and some new mini-games, *Sabre Wulf* is reminiscent of the 8bit original in that it's simple but seemingly effective fun.





The overhead-viewed adventure section (left) is riddled with entrances to underground levels presented firmly as platform sections. While the usual goal is to grab a piece of treasure from the dozing Wulf, the occasional special item must also be retrieved (above)

Detonator

Format: PS2
Publisher: Midas
Developer: Kadokawa Shoten
Origin: Japan
Release: February 2

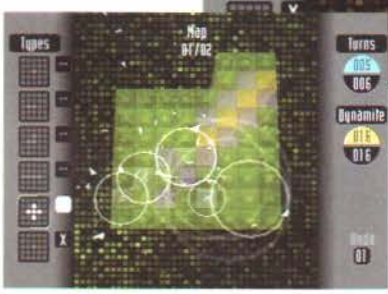
Memories of Fantavision's explosive gameplay rekindled at a bargain price

Puzzle games don't really have to have plots, of course, but it seems that they still have to try. *Detonator*'s excuse for asking you to arrange various shapes in a conditional fashion on a colourful canvas is that you're trying to bring the house down, destroying whole tower blocks by arranging chunks of 'dynamite' on the weak spots of a towering building.

The rules are this: you have a limited number of turns, plus a limited amount of dynamite. The explosives don't just come in different shapes, but different sizes, meaning that simply fitting the shapes on the canvas presented is not enough – you have to find the best fit possible. Here's the trick: if you can vertically sandwich an unexploded block between two pieces of dynamite, it will be taken out in the blast, thus bringing in an element of forward thinking, allowing you to orchestrate explosions that will take out several secondary blocks in the process.

Detonator has taken some understated style cues from games such as *Fantavision*, *Flipnic* and *Kurushi*. The block-plopping puzzles are dressed up with clear, minimal colours and a backdrop of shimmering sequins, along with a mesmerising and only occasionally irritating soundtrack of dance-free skeletal melody. A worthy-looking puzzler, then.





Despite the variety of modes, there's nothing more here than a few riffs on the central idea of premeditated destruction. It's limited, sure, but completely sound. The trade-off for being limited is that it's part of Midas' budget range





Levels are topped and tailed with a fly-by of the buildings both before and during their destruction. They jar a little, but are welcome

Cy Girls

Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Konam
Developer: Konami JPN Eas
Origin: Japa
Release: Apr
Previously in E12

Toy dolls come to life in Konami's low-calorie feminised retread of Metal Gear Solid. Cue gratuitous shower scene...



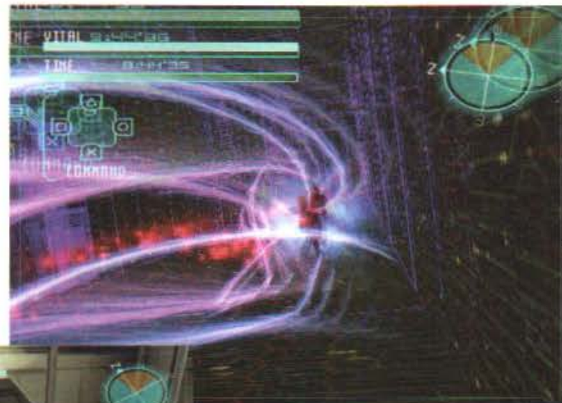


Your characters are agile, performing rolls, jumps, ledge-grabs and wall-runs... but to little effect, as the combat is so simplified

The sassy futuristic ninja sexbomb Cy Girls were originally a series of action figures from Takara. In this videogame imagining of their adventures from Konami's Japan East studio, they've been called into action as a result of the world's entire electricity network short-circuiting on 'Damnation Monday' in 2058. We know this because the game force-feeds you hours of superfluous FMV backstory before you're allowed to touch the joypad.

It's instantly apparent that everything about *Cy Girls*, from the daft cyber-samurai setting to the *MGS*-style interface to the briefest glimpse of naked female flesh in the opening cut-scene, is designed to plug directly into the pleasure node of anime-loving fanboys. Sadly, the gameplay itself has been less carefully considered. While your two heroines have a nice variety of moves at their disposal, they are executed a little clumsily. Combat is facile and the 'find switch to open door' mechanic frequently rears its ugly head.

Locations are impressively distinct and the game is full of pleasing stylistic touches, but you can't shake the feeling that it's mere *Metal Gear Solid*-lite. Then again, there are two discs of this stuff, and if you like your game characters sharp, sassy and, above all, female, you may want to check out the Cy Girls when they appear in April.





Left: That could easily be *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s Raiden on the Big Shell. *Cy Girls* borrows the *MGS2* technology, but doesn't add too many original ideas of its own

Champions Of Norrath: Realms Of EverQuest

Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Ubiso
Developer: Snowblin
Origin: U
Release: March 1

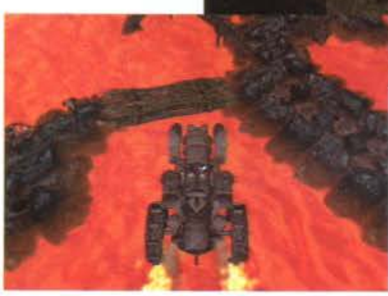
EverQuest on a console? Fans would say it's like losing a worn patchwork gauntlet and finding some fine padded leggings...

Set a couple of centuries before the main *EverQuest*, *Champions Of Norrath* cordially beseeches you to safeguard the future of the kingdom as a volunteer hero, preferably with a handful of friends in tow. Your adventure interlocks an epic series of quests as you collect flowers, mend lava pumps and destroy catapults, flattening throngs of goblins with repetitive wallops as you go. Each kill helps to level up your character's strengths, and you can also buy class-specific powers by spending points on a simple skills tree.

Weapons and pieces of armour have slots into which sparkling stone shards and gruesome enemy leftovers can be plugged, each of which will add a specific character enhancement. However, any cold resistance or endurance boosts you slot in are not recoverable, so you'll need to make sure you don't waste them on equipment you'll soon be replacing.

There's plenty of flexibility for adding players to your singleplayer quest, or siphoning off a character to take into online games. Hopefully, the frustrations of the menus will be eased before release, and later stages of the game will allow more complicated co-operation between players. For life-swallowing RPGs, it's this kind of fine-tuning that makes the difference between compulsive and compelling.





When one of your party dies, you may be faced with a lengthy trudge back to the last checkpoint to respawn them. Morale can be kept up via USB headset chitchat





Despite the gloomy caves, much of the game is gleamingly beautiful. Sadly, the overhead camera rarely lets you appreciate it

Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising

Format: PC
Publisher: Novalogic
Developer: In-house
Origin: US
Release: Q2

Planning your holidays? NovaLogic recommends Indonesia as the perfect place for you and 63 of your friends to let off some steam





Levels can cover up to 64 square miles, so the inclusion of planes, boats and helicopters is a practical rather than indulgent decision

War has always been good business, but videogames are mining its profitable seams more aggressively than ever before, as this month's Prescreen selections show. *Joint Operations* bucks the trend of its competitors by setting this conflict in the near future, when the troubles in Indonesia boil over.

Although singleplayer missions are included, this is devised primarily as a multiplayer match-up. The usual range of character classes is available – medic, engineer, heavy gunner, etc – and teams of up to 32 will be supported. Vehicle sets are designed with the scale of pitched online or LAN battles in mind. Huge hovercraft invite you to load up several tanks and throb upstream mob-handed, rickety Indonesian barges look naked without a dozen grimey comrades training nervous rifles on the river bank. The engine is a polished version of that which powered *Comanche 4* and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, and as a consequence handles all the helicopters and planes happily.

NovaLogic is well aware of *Battlefield*'s dominance, but hopes that vast scale and careful balancing will let it fight on equal terms. Not that we'd stoop to the obvious irony that the scramble to control the wargame market is turning into something of a war in its own right.





NovaLogic is hoping for some strong mod community support, and is concentrating on making every aspect of the game accessible to map builders rather than trying to produce a totally exhaustive selection of its own

Pool Paradise

Format: PC, PS2, GC, Xbox
Publisher: Ignition
Developer: Awesome
Origin: UK
Release: March

Archer Maclean unleashes his most ambitious baize-based simulation to date – and it's happening down on the beach

Snooker and pool games aren't usually the kind of thing to have seasoned gamers drooling, but when Archer Maclean's famously meticulous Awesome team are involved, it's usually worth chalking your name on the board. This is Awesome's first game for years without Jimmy White's direct endorsement, although he does appear as the game's ultimate boss. Instead, the developer is relying on *Pool Paradise*'s sheer comprehensiveness to lure the punters in.

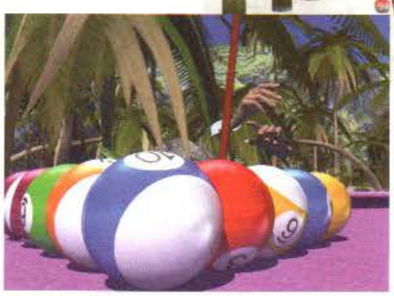
Forget the fact that the game is set on a desert island with tons of processing power wasted on animating butterflies and shadows. The real business here takes place on the baize, with ten rule types offered. Shaped tables encourage trick shots, and you can even play on ice so the balls skid instead of roll. There's darts, a coconut shy, *Dropzone*...

Whatever the extras, a pool game will stand or fall by the ability of its physics to convince. *Pool Paradise* is pretty thorough here, and by doing the maths you can put the ball where you want. However, it will be the ability of the game to translate the *feel* of pool that will determine if you should spend your coins here, or upstairs in the Dog and Duck.

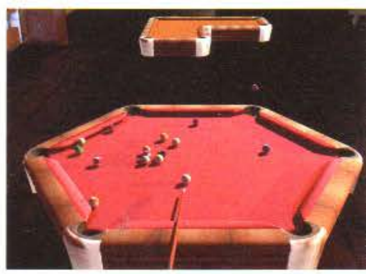
In addition to *Pool Paradise*, Maclean is working on a new game that he promises doesn't involve pool or snooker. Or even billiards. More news soon.



Surely the last thing you'd be doing on paradise island is racking up? But at least the palm trees and sand make for a more relaxed setting than the usual sticky carpets and torn wallpaper







The oddly shaped tables are designed to test your knowledge of the angles – and to show off Awesome's impeccable ball physics

Soldiers: Heroes of World War Two

Format: PC
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: Best Way
Origin: Ukraine
Release: Summer 2004

Codemasters expands its World War Two ambitions with a title that has more in common with Cannon Fodder than Commandos





When taking control of a character or vehicle, fire is directed using sweeps of the mouse, while fine movement is left to the cursor keys

Where now for World War Two strategy? While developers such as 1C go about creating an ultra-realistic battlefield for *Wartime Command: Battle For Europe 1939-1945*, their label-mate Best Way is attacking the middle ground, building a wargame that has more in common with the arcade action of yesteryear than modern titles. Chief among the retro stylings is a unique control system that allows for extravagant player experimentation. Characters and vehicles can be directed using a mouse interface or controlled through the cursor keys in a *Micro Machines* homage.

The intersection between these two styles forms the central mechanic. In a scenario we saw, where two tank brigades faced off, the player's platoon was ordered to take on the enemy directly while a single tank flanked the target. While the vehicles under AI control were able to pin down the enemy, the lone tank was able to attack the rear, decimating the opposition.

The battlefield will encourage exploration and experimentation, as Codemasters is aiming for scenarios in which every object will play a role. Haystacks, for instance, can hide a soldier or be blown apart, causing a diversion. *Soldiers* has every chance of becoming a standout title in a crowded genre.





Chief among the vehicles demonstrated by Codemasters were the aircraft. Although they're limited to flying less than 30 feet above the ground, they prove a genuine draw and can be a twitchy thrill to manoeuvre

Perimeter

Format: PC
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: K-D Labs
Origin: Russia
Release: Spring 2004

Previously in E132

The Russians promise a unique take on strategy, where the landscape plays as much of a role in the proceedings as the troops and bases

The soundbite for *Perimeter* is "Real Terraforming Strategy." It's a cute enough phrase, but it doesn't actually explain the fundamentals of this Russian-developed RTS.

After a brief demonstration from Codemasters, we came away informed, but nervous. The key to the game lies not in its unique and deformable terrain, but in units that deform into drops of nanotech-inspired goo and can reform at will, T-1000 style.

This opens up some unique tactical opportunities. With three types of basic unit available, each with five technologies, the possibilities for combination and recombination are almost endless. Already, Codemasters talks of turning a platoon of tanks into an enormous worm and using it to burrow under your opponent's shield, splitting back into its constituent segments as it emerges. Normally impenetrable, the shield requires enormous amounts of power – and that comes from claiming territory, levelling it out using an army of drones and building a power conduit on the new space.

The problem is one of complexity. There's no doubting K-D Labs' ambition, but with so many combinations of units available, along with the further complications of terraforming, it may find balancing all these variables an impossible task.





The landscapes of *Perimeter* are occasionally hostile, with a series of indigenous life forms that will attack either player. You could even meet Gaia herself, the face of the planet





The titular defensive shield in action. While no weapon can penetrate the barrier, it requires enormous amounts of energy to run

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates...

Iris No Atelier Eternal Mana

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Gust
Developer: In-house





The sixth in the colourful *Atelier* series brings together the hallmark vibrancy, elemental mana creatures which can be trained to explore or fight, and a time-based battle system

Michigan

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Spike
Developer: In-house





The creator of *Killer 7* sends you, oddly, to Chicago as a TV reporter on the trail of some odd goings-on, equipped only with a video camera and a choice of busty assistants

Red Dead Revolver

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox
Publisher: Rockstar
Developer: Angel Studios





Left for dead by Capcom more than a year ago, Rockstar has revived this Spaghetti Western tribute and hopes to fashion it into the definitive console cowboy shooter. Saddle up, y'all

The Rumble Fish

Format: Arcade
Publisher: Sammy
Developer: Dimps





Remnants of the old SNK team are at work on an Atomiswave fighter, featuring 2D 'multi-jointed sprites' against a background of 3D environments and spectacular lighting effects

ZOIDS Infinity

Format: Arcade
Publisher: Taito
Developer: In-house





This arcade title will feature *Virtual On*-style twin-stick control, and the chance to save your customised robot onto an ID card which can then be traded or used over the NESYS network

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house





It may be ten years since Tim Burton's spooky Christmas classic first hit the cinema screen, but Capcom's intriguing interpretation appears to be a cut above most shoddy movie-licensed games

Onimusha 3

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house





The third iteration of Capcom's strong samurai slasher series ups the visual ante by relocating to a present-day Paris overrun by giant robots and Jean Reno. Robot's CGI is typically cool

Powerdrome

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox
Publisher: Evolved Games
Developer: Argonaut





Argonaut's *Powerdrome* will become the second game published by new British company Evolved Games, after it rescues *Malice* from limbo in March. Online racing should be key

Spaced/invaded

In which we attend an industry party, and observe a (self) love story







Stop us if you've heard this one before. A girl walks up to a guy at a *Space Invaders* cabinet on one side of a crowded bar. Pretty young thing – the girl, not the cab, which is bruised but glorious – and out of place in a party full of game journalists and hangers on. She's one of the latter, but without a plus one, and a better class of ligger you'd be hard pushed to find. He's pretty too, but wholly absorbed. "Hey there," she says, mouth curving into a slimline hit-me-up smile. "How's it going?" He doesn't react. His eyes stay on the screen, pupils fixed and focused. His hand twitches on the stick, not with anxiety but with precision. His lips count out the bullets: 19… 20… 21…

"Hey…" she says again, confident the bar noise drowned out her introduction. "Twenty-two…" he murmurs, and fires again. Four white pixels advance up the playfield. She's about to speak again, but then he glances round. "Hey," he says, and twists back to the on-screen drama. The bullet strikes the mystery ship dead centre. 300 points.

"Good shot!" she says.

"Furrer method," he replies, and continues to watch, tap, adjust the base like a fighter pilot coming in to land. Like a racing driver on his fastest lap. Like a speed-wrecked surgeon before the first incision.

"Furry method?" she asks.

"It's not cheating," he replies, defensively. "It's no more cheating than a hurdler knowing their stride pattern. You count – six, seven – and then you fire." She glances over to the rest of the party – a woman is weaving among the liggers with a tray of cocktails, drinks soon to be sunk into bellies so difficult to sate. "The Nagoya attack…" says the boy, regaining her attention, "now *that's* cheating." He hits fire on 14 this time, and another mystery ship explodes for 300 points.

Now she's really looking for an exit, but there are none to be found. Videogame industry parties are full of small, tight-knit social groups. Well-regarded PRs mix with miniature cliques of journalists. There is the same guestlist at every event: only the stated reason for celebration, the pre-booked venue and the glamorous cocktails change. The parties happen when a game is released, a milestone is met or a target is exceeded, and Taito's bash to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Space Invaders* is one of the better ones. The St Martin's Lane Hotel bar is long and thin, the music at the right volume, the drinks at the right price. The drinks are free.

He's not interested in drinks, or her in fact, just his rise up the score table, which is thrilling and fun but ultimately insular and fruitless – insidiously exclusive entertainment. These parties are the same, and we wonder if this sort of event is really to anyone's benefit except the 200 people who show up week in, week out. Could budgets be better spent on celebrating with people who aren't so spoiled? Courting the specialist press is all well and good, but will the specialist press separate this party from the next when they're writing next month's filler news stories? Or will it all run into one long and hazy bacchanalian memory, punctuated by elegantly parceled gift bags that go straight on eBay when the hangover's cleared?

Who knows? Who cares? The pretty boy has three lives left. The pretty young girl walks away from him, away from the party and towards the exit. Pretty old **Edge** heads to the bar.









ShellShock: Nam '67

The maker of Killzone takes on the Vietnam war with a unique selling point and an interesting line in morality. The result is going to be atrocious…

The wargame market has never been so crowded, and developers have to work harder and harder to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Guerrilla has a stark claim to fame: *ShellShock's* selling point – and the developer isn't coy about calling it that – is what it terms 'the atrocities.' Tired of games that depicted war as a clean and heroic affair, it felt that a Vietnam game was the perfect opportunity "to show what war is really like." The result is a traditional wargame – thirdperson, mission based – which is untraditionally upfront about the tortures and executions that characterised the Vietnam war as one of the dirtiest of modern times. The painting Guerilla has commissioned of a crucified GI serves as a manifesto for its intentions with the game.

It's an impossible manifesto, of course, morally, legally and technically. It can't and won't allow the player to kill and maim children, despite the evidence of their role as combatants during the conflict. And what atrocities do feature will, on the whole, be something you witness rather than perpetrate. Nor will it be able to depict the mundane cruelties of war: the sickness, the foot rot, the hours spent cramped in a flooded trench watching a friend bleed to death. And even if it did set out to integrate these enemies of satisfying gameplay into the mix, it's unlikely that current technology could present them with the visceral immediacy they demand. Videogames haven't found – yet – a way to 'do' brain gobbets landing on your boot or the sickening gleam of bone in your own shattered hand. Nevertheless, it's a proposal that is both commercially savvy and oddly morally responsible. By trying to more accurately reflect the level of violent damage done by a group of men to another group of men, Guerrilla is leaving itself in a less hypocritical position than other wargames which condemn the violence of war in one press release and brag about the profits they've made from depicting it in another.

Instead, *ShellShock's* developer is at pains to stay morally neutral on the subject of the Vietnam war, and of war in general. Consequently, there is no Hollywood-style poetic justice to balance the storyline. If one of your fellow soldiers executes a couple of innocent villagers for idle sport in mission three, you won't see him coated in a layer of friendly-fire napalm in mission 11. Things happen, and then other things happen, and there is no moral merry-go-round making sure everyone gets what's coming to them. It's a bold decision, and should considerably amplify the player's own



When a bullet hits a body, it triggers a process Guerrilla calls 'chunking', which does exactly what it sounds like – governing which bits fall bloodied to the grass and which stay attached

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Eidos**
Developer: **Guerrilla**
Origin: **The Netherlands**
Release: **Summer 2004**



Interview: Martin de Ronde
Commercial director, Guerrilla

The positioning of *ShellShock* is a very savvy proposal. Is this a market-driven game, or a creatively driven game?

We don't want Guerrilla to be – and no disrespect to the company – another Looking Glass. They were responsible for some of the best games ever made creatively, but then they sold a grand total of 48 units or something. Our business model has always been to marry creativity within the team with a solid commercial proposal. If someone would come to us, from within the team, and say: 'We want to do a game about jungle warfare, and set it in Africa,' we might say: 'Well, what about Vietnam?' because everybody's doing World War Two games, and Vietnam might be the next logical step. And that's actually not very far from how the *ShellShock* project actually progressed.

There's a huge preponderance of wargames at the moment. Do you feel you're contributing to a narrowing of the game market?

Well, OK, Martin with his 'I run a company with 75 employees' hat on would say that we need to marry creative and commercial decisions, where the commercial decisions are always the most important. But Martin the gamer will always say: 'Every year I see less and less innovation in the industry in terms of game mechanics and completely new game genres.' I still see evolution within existing genres and I see a rise in production values, but commercial pressures are there and we cannot escape them. The only way out of it is to go through this phase of extending the market even further. I'm using the movie analogy again, but why are we able to have arthouse movies? It's because the market is able to sustain production costs with demand. We talk about being massmarket, but we're not massmarket. Far from it. Major games sell only four to five million units. My mum, she knows 'Titanic' and 'Shrek' because she sees them in the newspapers. If you asked her about *GTA* she wouldn't even have heard of it, even though it's the biggest selling title of all time, or the last decade or whatever. So we're far from massmarket. We need to extend the market, and then we'll have an audience – because ten per cent of the market by then will be four to five times as great, and they will buy *Ico* and *Rez* and it will be sustainable.

You talked in issue 127 about developers hiding creative innovations within traditional game structures. What are *ShellShock*'s Trojan horses?

This is a far more straightforward game. You won't see a *Tetris* mini-game between levels. There's no Trojan horses in *ShellShock*, because there was no need. No one came up with anything that was truly groundbreaking, and we looked at it and said: 'This is never going to sell, so we need to disguise it as something else.' Most of the ideas were very straightforward, and we just innovated a little bit.

Doesn't balancing the contradictory needs of authenticity and gameplay lead to inconsistencies in the game world?

If it's really authentic, but it plays like shit, then it goes out. That's the first rule. If we had 50 authentic features that we needed to go into the game and if it turns out that 25 of those features can be left authentic, but 25 have to be changed for gameplay, then clearly we've made a mistake in choosing the theme. In this case it's only been an occasional time when we've needed to make that call.

You're trying to stay morally neutral on the war. Is that possible when you're effectively editing out some of the worst US atrocities?

We didn't want to say that war is good or war is bad. There are some games who make a stand in their marketing, saying that war is bad, but they still make a game out of it. We're not taking a stand for either side, US or Vietnamese, and doing the hypocritical thing of saying war is bad and then still making an entertainment property out of it. Any creation is always a subjective process, there's always somebody making decisions about what to show and not to show, but we've tried to remain as neutral as we can be.

Many films legitimise their portrayal of war violence by claiming a wider message. Is that a claim you'd ever make for *ShellShock*?

I'd say that if we say *ShellShock* has a message... well, we haven't put one in there, so we'd be lying. This is a conscious decision to distinguish ourselves from other wargames, and we feel that war as a subject matter had not been treated in its entirety by other wargames. We have a different take and we hope that this will intrigue people into playing our game. We've not set out to say: 'We should show the world that there's more to this war than they realise.' The moment we start doing that, we're making it hard for ourselves. We're just trying to make a damn fine videogame.

moral engagement with the story.

Against this backdrop of authentic atmosphere and morally moderated realism, Guerrilla intends to have you play out one man's journey through a year of Vietnam combat. There is no winning and losing in *ShellShock*; you won't play the hero's role in a pivotal battle that will change the fate of the war. Instead, your goal is simply to survive your tour of duty.

The game makes no assumptions about whether you're a gung-ho pro-American glad for the chance to do your virtual bit or a curious pacifist willing to see what happens to a man forced into an impossible position, but as your character becomes more experienced in the brutalities of jungle warfare, he evolves from a rough-and-ready squaddie to a highly trained special ops agent. It's a clever concept that allows Guerrilla to build a strong and responsive character into the heart of their game, while providing a rationale for a range of mission types as the game turns its attention from full-scale ground assaults to solo assassination attempts. However, it's also a decision that pits it head to head with *Medal Of Honor: Pacific Assault*'s carefully planned story arc.

In the light of all this thematic innovation, Guerrilla is happy to admit that *ShellShock*'s gameplay won't be aggressively revolutionary. Moving with one stick, looking with the other, cycling weapons on the D-pad and curving grenades over the enemy's heads is something you're unlikely not to have experienced before.

There was only one level available for us to try, and although randomised respawning points shook things up on each playthrough, the mission followed conventional patterns as your fellow soldiers hung back until you'd completed key mission objectives. It's clear Guerrilla has no intention of alienating potential customers by trying anything too aggressively leftfield. Combat, however, is nerve-wracking and intimidating, as the thick foliage can make it hard to be sure if the way ahead is clear or clogged with gooks. Which raises another question – will *ShellShock* be as comfortable with racial epithets as it is with obscenities?

> "The game makes no assumptions about whether you're a gung-ho pro-American or a curious pacifist willing to see what happens to a man forced into an impossible position"

Your squadmates can be hit, but they're reassuringly (and a little un-authentically) resistant to friendly fire, and a colour-changing reticule makes it easier to distinguish friend from foe than the clinging jungle mud would normally allow.

For the battles to be tense and unpredictable, the AI for both the VC opponents and your squad needs to be cunning and responsive. Game director **Dave Bowry** is realistic: "We



Clockwise from top left: Martin de Ronde, commercial director; Guerrilla's seven-storey canal-side home; the desk of Guerrilla's artist-in-residence; Dave Bowry, game director













Throughout the game you'll be able to call in supporting fire. Mortar strikes can be set up quickly and flexibly. Napalm attacks are more focused, but may take longer to arrive

won't make any grand claims for the AI. You can't any more, because so many games shout about it at preview stage and then don't deliver." It's a laudable attitude, and indicative of Guerrilla's quiet confidence in the impressive technical resources which both *ShellShock* and *Killzone* draw from. Certainly, the AI demos on display were persuasive, as VC troops identified and pursued opponents they glimpsed in their peripheral vision, and doggedly tried to locate the source of a distantly heard gunshot.

The question remains, however, of how intelligible the AI's responses will be in the chaotic confusion of a jungle battle. However cleverly programmed, an AI's behaviour can feel stupid and bizarre to the player if he has no clear idea what it has been triggered by. Guerrilla could, and perhaps will, argue that encountering stationary and distracted VC is entirely in keeping with the authentic portrayal of an untrained force fighting in dense and difficult conditions, but players may feel otherwise.

There's a bit of every press presentation that is always the same, and it's when one journalist asks about the multiplayer and the next about the online. Usually it's followed by a flurry of gushing positivity and ambitious promises. At Guerrilla it was followed by a "no" and a "no," for *ShellShock* will be resolutely singleplayer. Rightly, the developers feel that there is no way to carry the tone they intend to establish in the game through to jovial Capture The Flag sessions, and don't want to dilute their efforts in the main game by trying to re-invent the online wheel.

Instead, efforts are being focused on the elaborate world of your base camp. This is the place where the 1967 setting will be felt most strongly. Acting as a conventional hub for mission briefings and other game admin tasks, it's also where you'll get to spend some downtime. As well as the potential for some mini-game amusement, your activities here will also impact on the main game. Sell on gear you've found on your missions and you'll be able to buy illegal weaponry that will widen your offensive possibilities on your next outing. It's not clear if that gear will include 'authentic' Vietnam trophies such as ear necklaces.

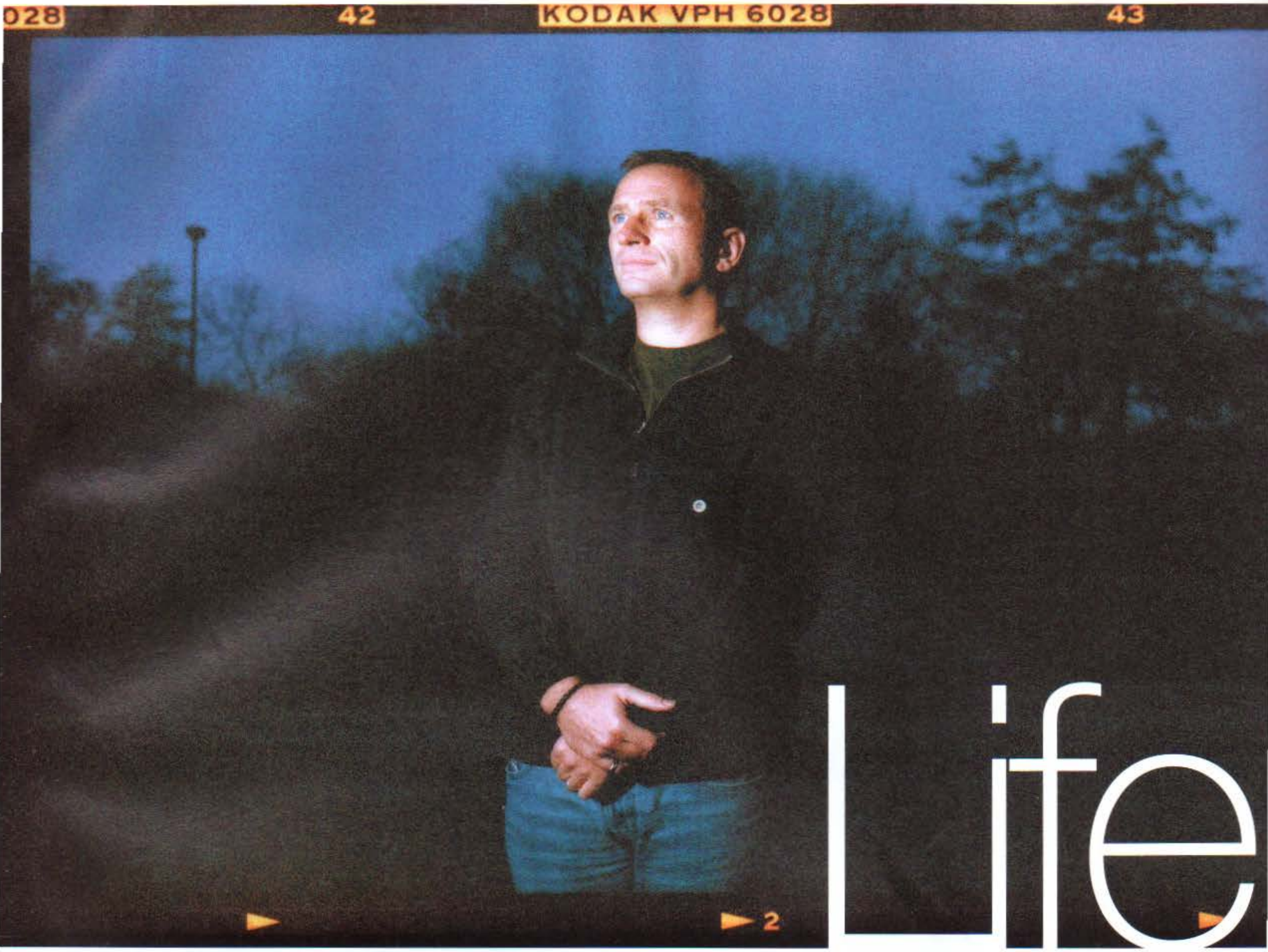
Whatever you get up to, it will be to the accompaniment of licensed songs of the era, contrasting with the austere silence of the jungle. In keeping with the rest of the game's tone there's likely to be a fair amount of drinking, swearing and smoking. Guerrilla wasn't parting with a single glimpse of the camp, but its thinking on it is already in quite an advanced phase: it's had to be scaled back so it doesn't "turn into some kind of enormous *Final Fantasy* thing."

It adds up to one of the most unusual cocktails of the conservative, the challenging and the imaginative we've had the chance to examine. From what Guerrilla has chosen to show so far, there is simply no way to judge if the gameplay will satisfy and if the tone will be shockingly crass or invigoratingly honest. Perhaps the simplest way to sum up *ShellShock*'s potential is to extend to you producer Chris Vallely's promise: "It's a war game where you'll never, ever feel like Chuck Norris."



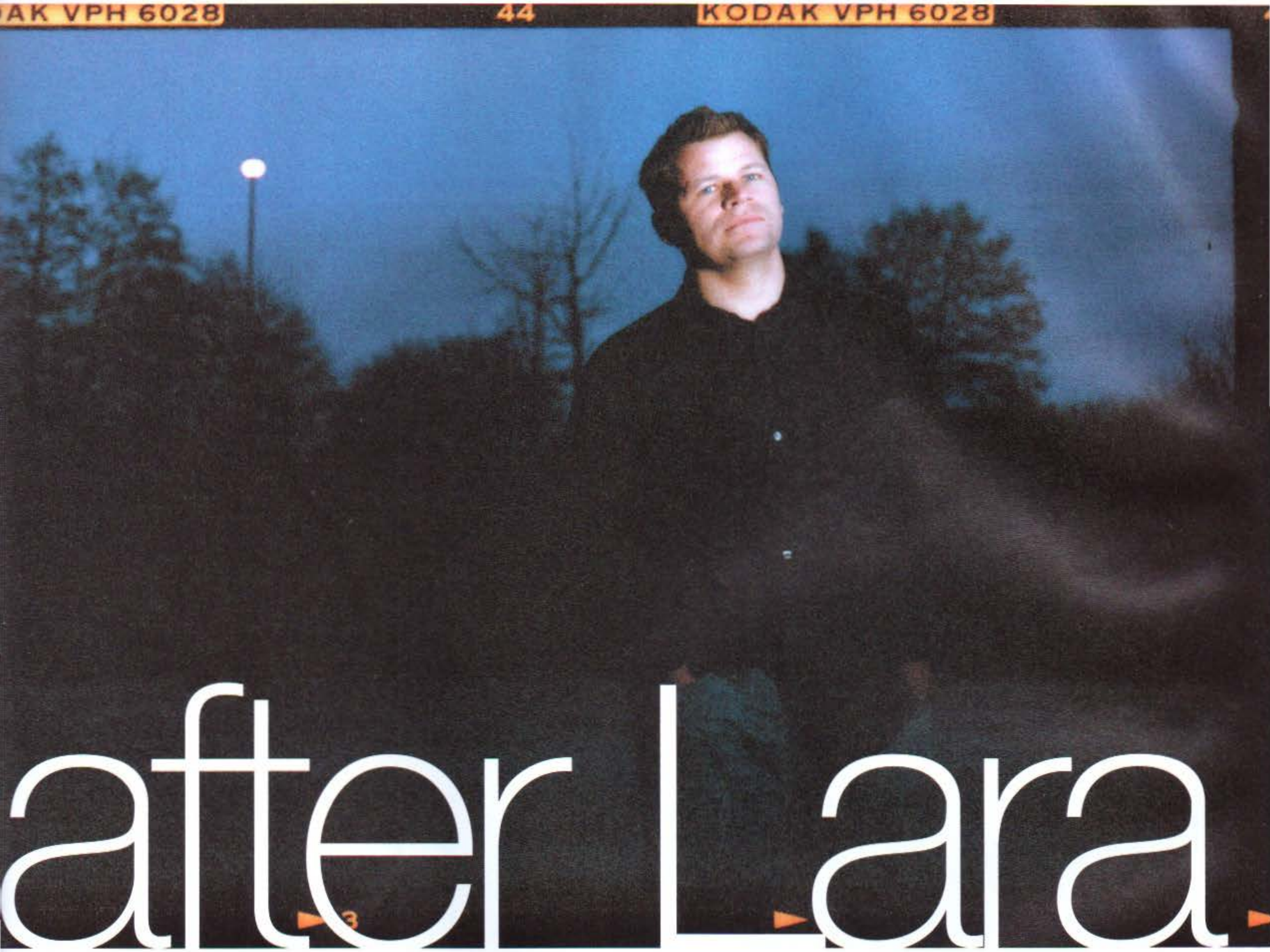


Although your squadmates will muck in in battle, it will be down to you to capture essential weapons and set vital charges



Life

In July 2003, Jeremy Heath-Smith was hung out to dry by Eidos following the fiasco that was Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness. Now, along with his brother and former Core cohort Adrian, he's ploughed his personal fortune into a new development startup called Circle Studio. Foolish, or fearless?



after Lara

Last year was the Smith brothers' annus horribilis. Since establishing Core Design in 1988, **Jeremy** (the business brain) and **Adrian** (the game design guru) had ridden an exponential success curve, from being one of the first UK studios granted a licence to develop for the Mega Drive to the creation and exploitation of Lara Croft. It was a boy's own tale, with boy's own cars in the Core Design parking lot to show for it. Then, in 2003, the wheels fell off.

Following numerous delays, Lara's PlayStation2 debut in *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* was rush-released in order to meet a financial deadline for Eidos, Core's publisher and owner. The game clearly still wasn't finished: the control system was woeful, the bugs were numerous and Core had compromised on its promise to revolutionise the series, providing a game that neither silenced the sceptics nor satisfied the fans. Jeremy, an Eidos director for three years, was told to take a hike. The job of developing the next *Tomb Raider* game was snatched away from Core and, as a final insult for a British institution, handed to an American studio, Crystal Dynamics. Jeremy and Adrian were left with little choice but to relinquish control of the development house that they themselves had founded.

After their failure to make an impression on the post-PlayStation market, you could forgive the Smith brothers for abandoning the videogame industry altogether. Lara's already provided them with a hefty pension and Jeremy pocketed a reported £1.8m a year for his stint on the Eidos board, so they weren't exactly back on the breadline.

However, less than seven months after the fateful release of *The Angel Of The Darkness*, they're sitting in the catalogue-fresh offices of their new company, Circle Studio. Situated less than half a mile down the road from the Core Design offices in Derby, Circle is funded entirely by the brothers themselves (although, with typical elder-brother brashness, Jeremy points out that he's the senior partner, because he's the richest). In the current British development climate, this is a risky venture. For now, Circle's staff consists entirely of ex-Core

employees, in other words the very people who bungled *The Angel Of Darkness*. The Smith brothers don't deal in self-doubt. They screwed up, they admit it, but now they're moving on and will be putting their money where their considerable mouths are.

Big mistakes

The Smith brothers also don't deal in revisionism. They're perfectly happy to talk about *The Angel Of Darkness* and readily admit they made "big mistakes." They refute the idea that should have let Lara lie three years ago, and as a franchise that shifted 28 million units worldwide on PlayStation, you can't begrudge their instinct to continue the *Tomb Raider* series on PS2. After all, with a launch line-up that included *Tekken Tag Tournament* and *Ridge Racer 5*, Sony wasn't exactly setting an original example. Core, however, made its debut on PS2 with brand-new IPs – *Project Eden* and *Herdy Gerdy* (of which, more later). Nevertheless, the brothers felt compelled to tinker with the *Tomb Raider* formula. "Everyone said they wanted something different from *Tomb Raider*," shrugs Jeremy. Like who? "Eidos, the magazines… In hindsight we shouldn't have ignored the massmarket consumers who wanted more of the same. We chased the critics rather than the punters."

To wit, the first ambitious plans for *The Angel Of Darkness* were laid, but Core was thwarted by the underwhelming power of the PlayStation2. "When the dev kits arrived, it turned out that the PS2 wasn't as fast, as powerful or as easy to program as we had been led to believe. In fact it was a complete git. So we had to go back to the drawing board."

The brothers' desperation to be ahead of the pack was their ultimate downfall as they continually pursued new technology until it was too late. "We chased like dogs with rabies the fact the game had to run in a frame," says Jeremy, "When in reality that's not something the average consumer notices if the game plays well. We should have bitten the bullet and dropped it to two frames a long time before." Adrian then points to another crucial error of judgement: "We developed a game that was led by animation, not by gameplay. We were tying the game to how Lara moved. She turned and rolled and flipped beautifully, but in the end that didn't matter because she was just too difficult to control."

The game missed its first proposed release date. Then it slipped for a second time. Eventually Core was given an ultimatum: either release *The Angel Of Darkness* before the end of Eidos's financial year in June 2003, or everyone gets screwed. Jeremy admits there was panic: "Suddenly the tide was coming in and we could see the water."

All this time, Jeremy and Adrian continued to give typically unruffled pronouncements to the press about how *The Angel Of Darkness* was still on track to become a modern masterpiece. "For the final 12 months, 35 people worked 18 hours a





day for seven days a week on that game, which is a monumental achievement. So even with two months to go we convinced ourselves we could pull it off. We had to." And Jeremy's final assessment? "It sold three million units, which ironically was more than Eidos expected after all the bad publicity. I don't think it was a disastrous game, but it wasn't the game we intended to make."

Jeremy became the sacrificial lamb and was packed off on gardening leave. Lara, meanwhile, was packed off to San Francisco. "It wasn't a shock," says Jeremy. "I honestly don't blame Eidos at all. If I were them – and remember, I spent a lot of time being them – it's exactly what I would have done, so I feel no bitterness." So, setting up on your own and poaching half of Core's workforce isn't some form of revenge, then? "Ha! I think Eidos had a reasonable idea that's what I'd do – I wasn't going to lie on a beach drinking pina colada!" In fact, Jeremy had a 12-month contract to serve out, "sitting at home being a good boy," as he puts it. Adrian was free to resign, set up Circle Studio and entice his Core faithful down the road – at which point it became obvious that Jeremy would be involved, officially or otherwise, so Eidos negotiated his contractual release. "We came to a sensible compromise agreement – we *can* use *Tomb Raider* technology but we *can't* produce a game with a female lead character, surprise surprise – and it's all fine. We were honest and up front with Eidos, which I think worked in everyone's favour. It's a very small industry so there's no point falling out about these things." The evening after the interview, Jeremy is due to have dinner with Eidos CEO Mike McGarvey, the first time the two will have seen each other since those negotiations. Is Eidos a potential publisher for Circle Studio games? Jeremy grins but, for a change, says nothing.

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"I have absolutely no embarrassment about how much money I've made out of Tomb Raider. The amounts are well publicised. If my picture is in the papers, well, that's fantastic."

Extravagant spending

Jeremy isn't shy when it comes to talking about money. At one point he refers explicitly to making "many millions of pounds" with Eidos. However, everyone who spent £40 on *The Angel Of Darkness* last summer might have been annoyed to read an ill-timed interview with the Smith brothers in the September issue of 'Loaded' where they boasted about their extravagant spending.

"Listen, I have absolutely no embarrassment about how much money I've made out of *Tomb Raider*," Jeremy booms. "In fact the amounts are well publicised because Eidos is a PLC. If my picture is in the papers under the headline 'Lara's boy makes millions again', well, that's fantastic. But I've made millionaires out of a lot of other people, so it's not all me, me, me. *Tomb Raider* turned Eidos from a company that was worth ten bob to being worth the best part of a billion dollars at its peak. *Tomb Raider* made that company. And guess what? We got paid. But they had a big slice of our lives in return."



The 'Loaded' interview actually took place after Eidos dumped on Jeremy. So was the braggadocio a way of thumbing noses at the old bosses? "Sure, a little bit of it was 'In your face, guys.' But I don't think we were being flash." This from a man with at least three top-of-the-range smartphones on his desk and an SUV with the number plate JHS1 parked outside. Except Jeremy honestly doesn't feel he needs to apologise for his wealth: "We made it from doing something we love, and now we're putting that money back into the games industry."

The establishment of a entirely new development studio, without external funding, is an expensive undertaking – but financial independence clearly has its advantages. "The advantage of self-funding is the ability to take a game further down the line before having to demo it to a publisher. The biggest downside to development has always been lack of cash. If you're always having to go to a publisher with a begging bowl, creativity will suffer."

Finding talented staff is a perennial problem for developers, especially startups. Obviously, Circle circumvented this problem by poaching its entire workforce from Core. "We asked 37 people to join us and 36 came," says Adrian, underlining the loyalty that Core staffers still felt for the Smith brothers, even after the *Angel Of Darkness* disaster. In business terms, it's an



Photography: Martin Thompson

Brothers gonna work it out

Who says game development isn't a family business any more? Here are the other Britsoft brothers proving that blood is thicker than binary code:

The Darling Brothers
Richard and David are the original bedroom coding geeks made good. After numerous homemade Spectrum and C64 successes, they set up Codemasters in 1986 with the help of their dad, Jim. *BMX Simulator*, *Micro Machines* and many others followed. Richard and David are now creative director and CEO of Codemasters respectively.



The Stamper Brothers
More veteran Brit coders, Chris and Tim Stamper were one of the most revered Spectrum programming teams as Ultimate: Play The Game. They formed Rare in 1985 and hit real paydirt when signed up by Nintendo to produce *Donkey Kong Country*, *GoldenEye* and others. Recently lured Microsoft into shipping them another fortune.



The Carter Brothers
Acolytes of Peter Molyneux, Dene and Simon Carter emerged on the scene recently at the head of their own Lionhead satellite studio Big Blue Box, responsible for much-anticipated epic RPG, *Fable*.



The Kingsley Brothers
Chris and Jason founded Rebellion in the basement of their student flat in the early '90s. Best known for the *Alien Vs Predator* games on the Atari Jaguar and then the PC, Rebellion has expanded into publishing, buying the 2000AD comic and then wasting this intriguing licence on the terrible *Dredd Vs Death*.



The Houser Brothers
Graduating from what was once BMG Interactive, Sam and Dan Houser were viewed as videogame industry chancers when they hooked up with well-connected Terry (son of Terence) Donovan and relocated to New York to form Rockstar Games. Luckily, they took with them a little cracker of a series called *Grand Theft Auto*, and the rest is history.



The Oliver Twins
Again proving that the brothers who program games together stay together. Arguably outdoing even the Darlings in the geek stakes, Philip and Andrew produced a ton of games for Codemasters back in the '80s (including *Grand Prix Simulator* and *Dizzy*). Now they churn out licensed products such as *Lilo and Stitch* and *The Mummy Returns* with similar abandon as the owners of Blitz Games.



The Collyer Brothers
Paul and Oliver are the founders of Sports Interactive, the company responsible for the hugely successful *Championship Manager* franchise. However, maybe we were wrong about the sticking together stuff… Oliver quit the company in 2002.



The Bitmap Brothers
Not strictly brothers at all. But then nor are The Chemical Brothers, The Marx Brothers or The Chuckle Brothers. So sue them.





extraordinary example of human asset-stripping, and odd that Eidos allowed it to happen. "Yes, but Eidos were resigned to it," explains Jeremy. "They could have tried to fight it, and it would have all got ugly, but no one's got the time or energy for a bloodbath." So is there any residual sympathy for Core and the staff left behind? "Sure, there are guys there who we employed and worked with for ten years," says Adrian. "We still see them around Derby, so it was an emotional process."

Jeremy is circumspect: "Core Design is now floundering around with a handful of people trying to get a project off the ground, and no real leadership, which is sad." He doesn't exactly radiate sympathy. Then again, he almost adds, it's not his problem. He's a businessman.

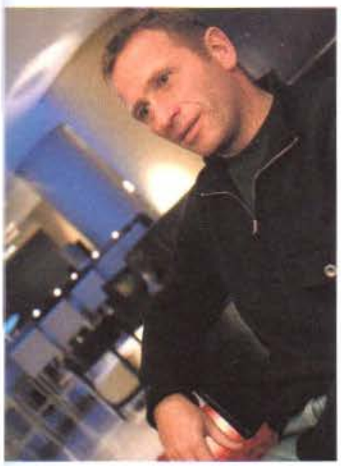


Other projects

You can't doubt the brothers' determination, but one concern about Circle's ability to succeed is suggested by Core's recent track record at making games that aren't called *Tomb Raider*. *Fighting Force* was thoroughly one-dimensional (although Jeremy points out that it sold well in the US), *Project Eden* was a bit of mess and *Herdy Gerdy* appealed to an audience that didn't exist. "There were



"Good game design means a simple, understandable and popular concept executed well. We're very confident we can make good games that will bring in a profit on our investment."



good things in all those games," Adrian protests, citing the bold graphical style and innovative flock mechanics of *Herdy Gerdy* as examples. He's well aware of their faults, too. "Ultimately, *Project Eden* was too hard to control and *Herdy Gerdy* was just too cute and too weird."

So the brothers have learned how to "take the risk out of the equation." Circle's two new games will offer no surprises in terms of style or approach, but will attempt to improve on existing genres. Jeremy talks about aiming within the "sweet spot," by which he means the types of game that have already proved popular with the PlayStation 2 audience. He's a big fan of the *Medal Of Honor* games, but feels he could improve on them. "Not that we're making a firstperson shooter," he adds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both games currently under development at Circle are thirdperson efforts, but Lara's lessons appear to have been learned.

"We're starting with the control," promises Jeremy. "That means the camera, the animation, how the character interacts with the environment. There still aren't too many thirdperson games out there that control perfectly, so that's a target for us."

One thing's for sure: there'll be no online elements. "There's no lack of technology or ability in the building to do that," says Adrian, "but why put an online mode in just to appease the hardcore if it's not going to a be a selling point? We've become more ruthless about these things."

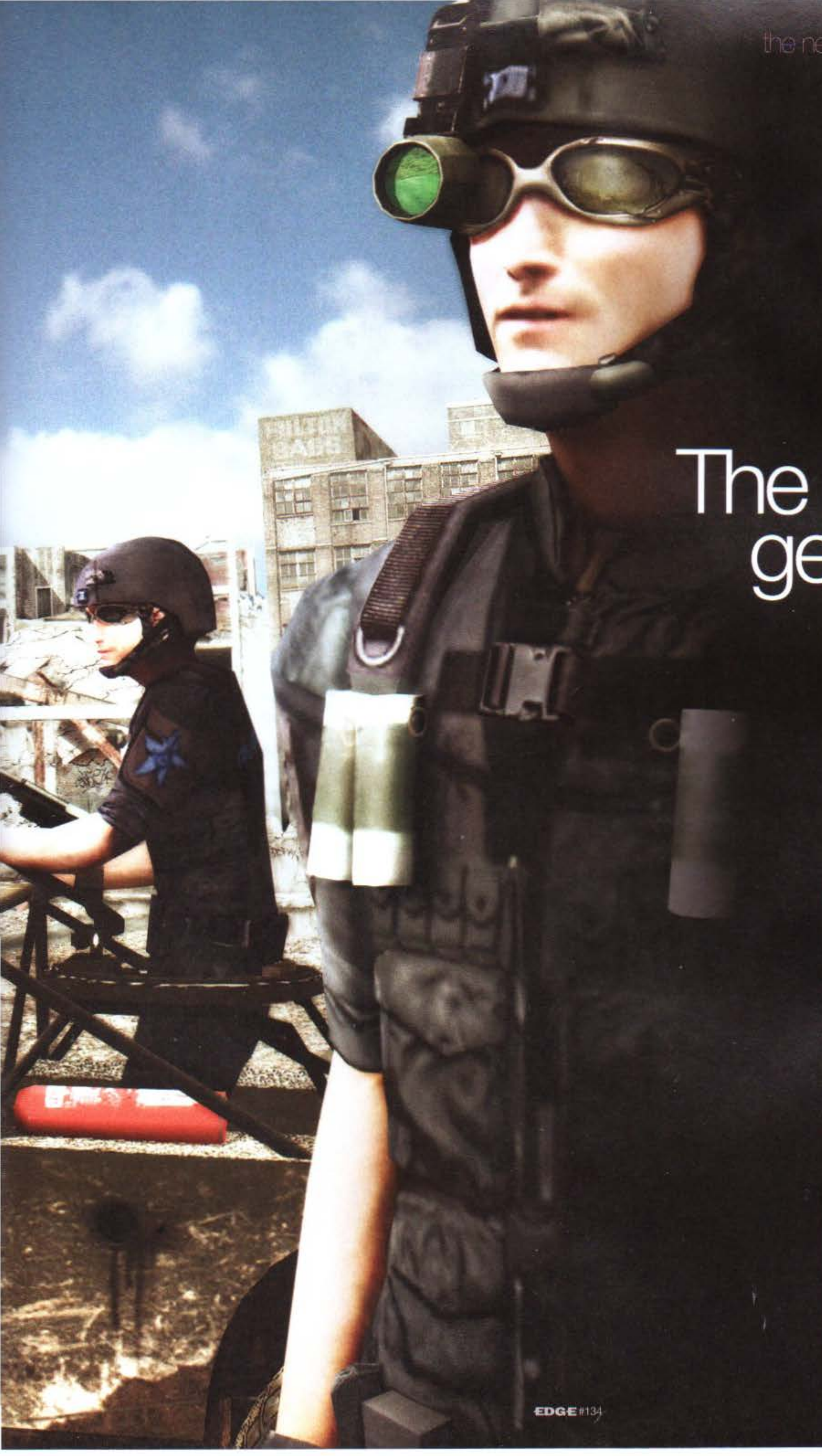
There are new laws of operation at Circle: everyone from the bottom up is given more creative input, no one works weekends and no project takes more then two years. These rules seem to have been drafted as much with everyone's sanity in mind after five years on *The Angel Of Darkness* than for their impact on the final games. The idea is that sensible working practices fuel success. No more biting off more than is chewable.

"We're trying not to be too clever," says Adrian. "Good game design means a simple, understandable and popular concept executed well." And if Circle's aims seem cynically reductive, just look at the current game charts while considering the corpses of UK development houses strewn across the battlefield, and then decide who's got the best business plan. Jeremy is adamant that Circle has got it sussed: "Having been involved in the development process with Eidos, I've seen a lot of presentations, and there are lot of very poor developers out there. The fact that some of them are still in business is astounding. So we're very confident we can make good games that will bring in a profit on our investment and make a publisher very happy."

In fact, the Smith brothers are confidence personified. Anyone who thought that losing the company would somehow bloody these two, and the intellectual property that made their fortunes, has obviously never met them. Turf Jeremy out on the street with only ten pence to his name and he's the kind of guy who'd come back to you a year later driving a Porsche. Now that he's got considerably more than ten pence to invest in Circle – enough to keep pesky publishers from interfering for the time being – its two games have instantly become hot industry property.

Will they be good enough to escape Lara's busty shadow? We'll know soon enough. As if to prove it's not *that* easy to shrug off the memory of a seven-year love affair, Jeremy inadvertently refers to the protagonist of a hypothetical game as "she". Then he realises his error, and for the briefest second, wears an expression you could just about describe as sheepish, before cracking on with his monologue as Adrian hoots derision from the other side of the room. The Smith brothers will have to go a long way to leave Lara behind, but they're making that journey at top speed.





The next generation

Once thought of as kids' toys, the next consoles will rank among the most complex computers ever built. Edge looks at how their power will be used

Over the past 15 years, game consoles have evolved from cheap collections of off-the-shelf parts to custom-designed boxes whose development is driving a large segment of the semiconductor industry. It's astounding how much time, money and effort mankind will spend being entertained. Indeed, the rumour mill surrounding the constituent components of the new wave of consoles is such that it's become a game in-and-of itself.

With water-tight NDAs signed, we're not in a position to share any more knowledge than anyone else with a relationship to the major hardware players. What can be revealed,

British developer Climax will not reveal which project this concept art is from, but it's presented using effects and a level of detail expected in a realtime gaming environment generated on next-generation console hardware. Post-scene processing gives the image its distinctive look. In terms of what it's creating right now, Climax's prototypes on monster PCs are "directly relevant to Xbox 2", and it will only need to rewrite back-end layers to get content up and running on PS3.

Triple-X-box

Although yet to be officially confirmed, the news that Microsoft's next console is going to use IBM's PowerPC chips wasn't unexpected. A technology agreement between the company and IBM had cryptically spoken of agreement to license leading-edge semiconductor processor technology for future Xbox products. What has caused a buzz of excitement, though, are reports that it will be using three PowerPC processors working in parallel.

Further reports claim these will be three custom-designed variants of IBM's PowerPC 976 chip. This 64bit processor is based on IBM's POWER5 architecture, which has a dual processor core. Each processor can also run two virtual processors, potentially giving Microsoft's next console the scope to run code on 12 processors. In addition, the POWER5 is what is known as simultaneously multi-threaded, also called HyperThreaded. This means each processor can run more than one program at once, hopefully ensuring all the chips are kept as busy as possible. The downside is that this relies on developers writing their games specifically to take advantage of the hardware configuration – something PC developers are still getting to grips with for Intel's HyperThreaded Pentium 4 processors.

Whichever way Microsoft and IBM intend to configure the processors, however, this architecture will enable developers to take full advantage of CPU-intensive calculations such as physics, audio and AI, without worrying about causing bottlenecks to the rendering. It's claimed that the other main component in the next Xbox will be the R500-class graphics chip from ATI, which is designed to be able to run anti-aliased games at High Definition TV resolution.

The other main area of discussion is the manufacturing process IBM will use for the chip, claimed to be a 65nm fab line. This is important, because at present 130nm-fabbed POWER5 chips rated at around 2GHz consume over 30W, which would cause problems in terms of the size of power supply and the amount of heat dissipated. Reducing the die size should reduce both.

The downside is that 65nm manufacturing remains something of an unknown, with many chip companies still struggling to deal with the 90nm process. Any problems with the 65nm technology could be disastrous for the smooth launch of a multi-chip console.

Sony's GScube offered the power of ten PlayStation2 consoles by simply bolting 16 of them together, illustrating the issues inherent with massively parallel system architecture



however, is how recent developments in the differing technological areas that feed the console market will change the face of gaming.

A new sensation

In hindsight, PlayStation2 marked the transition. Up to that point, consoles had been a subset of the wider PC industry. Bolting together standard components had been enough and software sold hardware – the hardware itself was irrelevant, or so said the conventional wisdom. PlayStation2, with its high-end consumer electronic sheen and hyped Emotion Engine, swept this all away. Co-opting PC-style architecture just didn't hack it any more. From that point on, game consoles became the driving force for chip designers – something it's taken Microsoft four years to understand.

Yet Microsoft's decision to ditch Xbox's Wintel legacy shouldn't have been much of a surprise. There are many reasons why consoles have diverged from the Intel and AMD way of doing things. The primary reason is the general-purpose nature of the PC. It's designed to perform a large number of varied instructions on a small and static dataset, such as a Word document. For this reason the overall performance of a PC is generally defined by its CPU clock speed – a measure of the number of instructions it can handle per second. The higher the clock speed, the faster the PC can crunch through its tasks, which is the reason companies like Intel place such importance on the continuing rise of processor velocity.

Yet as the CPU has increased the amount of information it can process per second, the memory and data-transfer subsystems that feed it this information have failed to keep up. This increasing level of inefficiency has, in turn, forced chip designers to come up with more ingenious ways of speeding up the flow of data.

Typical examples of this include the supply of more fast on-chip cache memory, additional slower general RAM or specific co-processing units, but this only adds to the general complexity and cost of such processors.

In contrast, game consoles require the exact opposite. Instead of processing a small amount of static data, they apply highly repetitive instructions to huge dynamic datasets consisting of textures and models, but these are so large it's inefficient to try to store them in a cache. Instead, they are delivered to the CPU via relatively small amounts of memory and very wide buses as they are needed. Happily, this philosophy also works in terms of price, as memory cost is limited while the high-bandwidth circuitry is a one-off design cost that can be offset by large-scale production. An approach labelled 'Compute, Don't Store' by some, it's one of the fundamental reasons behind the divergence of game consoles and general PC architecture.

High-resolution textures add obvious realism to scenes, but depth-of-field effects, applied to simulate camea focal lengths, bring more subtle graphical advances. With new hardware promising collosal geometry-handling power, developers will soon be able to shift away from obsessions like poly counts



Parallel lines

The first hint the next generation of game consoles would take this philosophy to its logical limits and use multiple CPUs came with Sony's experimental GScube. This collection of 16 sets of Emotion Engines and Graphics Synthesisers was designed as a prototype to handle animated movie data in realtime. Powerful as it was, it also demonstrated some of the issues involved with massively parallel systems. Despite physically consisting of 16 PlayStation2s, it 'only' had the power of ten. This inefficiency was a result of the overhead required to load-balance the system, ensuring all processors are always being fed data.

Although nothing ever came of the project, it wasn't a failure. "GScube was a first attempt for Sony," claims one CG specialist. "Like many Japanese companies, it tries somethin and then deconstructs it to learn about what works and wha doesn't. All the information gets fed back into the system to be used next time."

One advantage of such architecture is that it's extremely cost-effective for the performance offered. For one thing, the chips are much less complex than a single equivalent would be. They also offer reduced thermal and power requirements which give a manufacturer more options in terms of a console's form factor.

The biggest implication of this, at least for developers, wi be how easy it is to harness the potential. Massively parallel computing has always been plagued by a lack of good development tools, and with most developers taking three years even to get familiar with PlayStation2's brace of vector units, this must be a real worry.

The good news, though, is that such architecture will provide those who can handle it with an enormous opportunity to redefine what videogaming is all about.



The developer's view

Next-generation hardware won't be publicly available for at least 18 months, but some developers are already working on launch titles. "I avoid getting bogged down in predictions about how many billion polygons per second PlayStation3 will be throwing out," explains a senior system architect at UK development powerhouse Climax, which has been thinking about the impact of the consoles for a year. "That way lies massive trouble. What I'm doing is very different to anything I've written in the past. I'm trying to design technology that will scale and adapt to whatever turns up."

One trend that supports this approach is the increasing programmability of game consoles. PlayStation and N64 were fixed-function machines, which meant developers had to use whatever graphical features were hardwired in. With the current consoles, however, the Xbox in particular gives developers more scope to use the hardware in the way they desire. The next consoles should extend such features enormously.

"The syntax each machine understands will be very different but fundamentally I'd expect to be able to write the same shader code and, after some platform-specific translation, get the same results on each," says Climax's man.

This accounts for the way he is building his technology base. Currently being developed on a high-end PC, he's coding a high-level abstraction layer that will eventually plug into platform-specific components that can be written when more concrete details emerge.

"The arrival of PlayStation2 caught a lot of people on the hop because everyone believed the hype and it turned out to be not as straightforward as it could have been. Teams prototyping ambitious launch titles on PC were hit hard," he explains. "That's the point of the abstraction layer – it protects you from getting too specific. If something really exotic comes out, it won't affect the other platforms."

Another way the studio is preparing for the future is in changing the way its artists create assets. Instead of modelling using polygons, the flat three or four-sided elements with which in-game characters, objects and environments have traditionally been built, the studio is switching over to more complex techniques. Labelled under the catch-all term 'higher-order surfaces', they require artists to create their objects using curves rather than polygonal blocks. Climax has already shipped titles using some of these techniques, notably Bezier patches, which are the easiest higher-order surfaces to get to grips with. The power of next-generation hardware will require complete conversion to the cause, however.

"We're looking at using Beziers and sub-divisional surfaces for our launch game, and getting some good results," says Climax's code specialist. "If you want the body of a vehicle to nicely curve down, you can start off with the exact curve and build up from there rather than trying to shape thousands of small polygons."

The other advantage of sub-divisional technology is that it's easy to scale the resolution of models up and down. This futureproofs the work already undertaken by artists. If the new consoles are more powerful than expected they can just scale up the meshes. If less powerful, they simply reduce the amount of sub-divisions.

The hardware expert's view

According to **X**, a UK-based computer hardware expert, the main factors influencing the design of next generation consoles are no longer processing power and memory. "It's a given that new consoles will be more powerful than their predecessors," he says. "The problem for manufacturers is how they fulfil those assumptions within other design limitations, such as price and size."

An example of how such factors can have a major effect is the problem of heat. "One reason Microsoft had to ditch Intel was because a Pentium 4 requires a bulky power supply, consumes large amounts of power, is very noisy and dissipates huge amounts of heat," he explains. "That's why it's no longer sensible for console manufacturers to just ape the standard PC philosophy and speed up the CPU and the GPU."

Another reason for the rise of exotic console architecture is balance. "There's little benefit in making single components faster any more," X explains. "By definition, large-yet-fast processors always end up waiting for the slower system components to feed the right information." This is one of main reasons behind the rise of parallel processing. Eschewing monolithic components, it shares the work out amongst several subsystems. Such processors will be physically smaller, cheaper to manufacture and require less cooling, too.

"The start of this approach was PlayStation2," says X. "Sony used relatively slow processors but arranged them in parallel with embedded RAM to provide a lot of bandwidth."

The logical conclusion would be a massively parallel device that not only shares out its processing tasks internally but also links to remote units over a fast network, the so-called distributive processing approach. "The ideal would be to create processors that over time could be used in a variety of consumer electronics," X reveals. "Initially, you'd have a console that works on its own but in three or four years' time the same chips would be embedded in TVs or DVD players. Linking the whole system together, you can engineer games where you use different amounts of processing."



The tools provider's view

Before the developer comes the tools vendor. **Y**, a programmer at a US middleware company, has been working on next generation-oriented technology for 18 months. "It's a big switch," he reveals. "The low-level approach is radically different to what has gone before. It's all about having stacks of available bandwidth and streaming blocks of data very quickly." This created a problem for the company in terms of compatibility with its existing tools. "We argued about if for a while, but in the end we had to bite the bullet and come up with a clean-sheet implementation," Y explains. "It's just too different to continue to use our existing architecture."

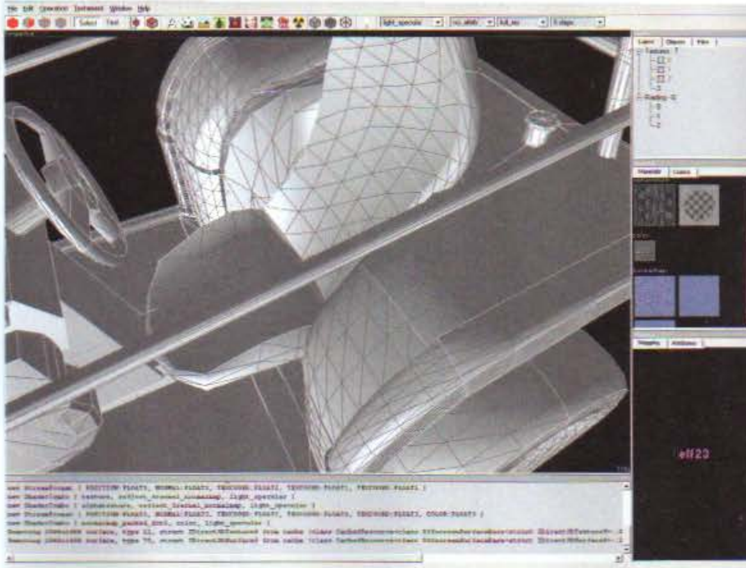
Pure technology aside, Y thinks the implications of the new hardware go much further. "I see the main focus going forward being content-creation tools," he says. "Even now, games such as *Half-Life 2* and *Doom III* are stunning – but they aren't technology-driven games, they're art-driven. Developers are going to be able to have more polygons on-screen than they can shake a stick at, but how are they are going to be able to generate, process and store them? Very few of them have thought seriously about the implications of the coming order of magnitude increase in the density of their content."

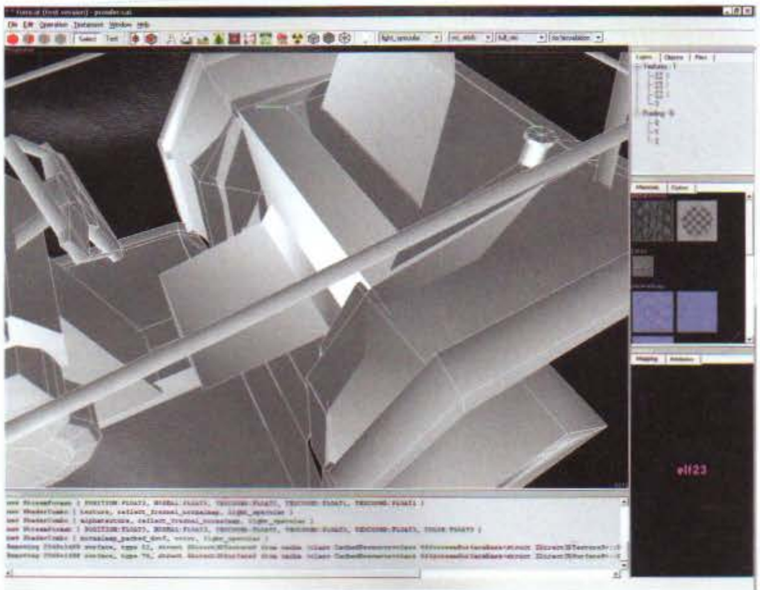
One example of this is the incredible jump in the resolution of models required by new rendering techniques such as normal mapping and spheric harmonic mapping. Using the latter, one studio has seen its model mesh resolution jump from 2,000 polygons in one title to two million polygons for its sequel. Such a spike puts huge pressure on basic infrastructure, even to the extent of hitting the 2Gb limit of addressable memory for 32bit processors such as the Pentium 4.

The tree stump pictured above shows the kind of detail possible with masses of additional memory available for textures in the new consoles; Microsoft's next console is currently projected to offer 256 megabytes of RAM. This urban image (left) displays Climax's multitexturing and post-processing technology

Next generation graphics

Despite the howls of anger this statement will provoke from musicians, AI specialists and physics fanatics, at the end of the day videogames are all about pretty visuals. From the days of blocky stickmen, through to 2D sprites and 3D wireframes, sight has been the primary sense by which certain games stood out from the competition. It's a factor the developers who are working on launch games for the next round of consoles can't afford to ignore. That's why so much research and development is going on into new rendering techniques that will close the gap between the richness of blockbuster animated films such as 'Finding Nemo' and videogames.





Bezier curves

A mathematically defined curve consisting of two endpoints and a curvature handle in 2D, or a 3D surface defined by 16 control points, Beziers are one of the simplest higher-order technologies. Using the control points, additional points can be generated on the Bezier path, which can then be defined as vertices and used to tessellate with points at the surface edges. Using such techniques, it's possible to generate models with different resolutions. This, combined with the fact that such patches can be easily rendered in realtime by 3D hardware, explains why Beziers are already commonly used in game development. Difficulties arise, however, when they are placed together to form larger areas. Care must be taken to avoid joint discontinuities, which cause gaps as the mesh resolution is changed. Special patches must be generated to solve this problem.

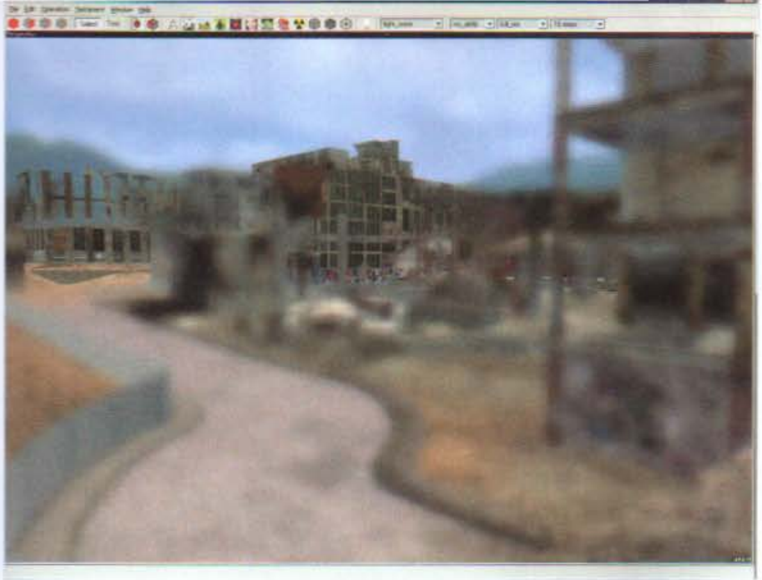
Images: The flexibility of Bezier curves can be clearly seen in this example. The resolution of the model can be varied depending on the how many times a Bezier patch is populated with additional control points. This makes Beziers useful for creating in-game level-of-detail models.

Sub-divisional surfaces

Fitting in somewhere between polygon meshes and patches come sub-divisional surfaces. These smooth, algorithm-defined surfaces are easier to join together than patches. They share the same characteristics in terms of being able to sub-divide (hence the name) allowing the resolution of models to be greatly increased. The traditional modelling technology for animated movie production – the classic Catmull-Clark scheme as used in the groundbreaking short 'Geri's Game' and of course 'Toy Story' – is less easy to handle in realtime. Also, because of the speed with which they scale, growing in steps of four, 16, 64, etc, they can suffer from lack of control. Many game developers use them for off-line modelling, but they are likely to become important if rumours about next generation consoles being based around higher-orders and sub-divisional surfaces are proved correct.

Shader language

Small pieces of code, traditionally used by the movie industry to create complex graphical effects, shaders recently made the move to computer games. Shaders are known as pixel and vertex shaders, referring to the level at which they operate. Vertex shaders are often used for animation, while pixel shaders are generally used to create material and lighting effects. The most complete shading language is defined for Pixar's Renderman package, although this is limited to off-line batch-processing applications. Microsoft's High Level Shading Language is the most commonly used game shader family. Contained with the PC-based DirectX9 API, it allows developers to write their realtime shaders in a C-type language, a big step when compared to the previous assembly-style coding, hence the term high level shading language. NVidia has a version called Cg which handles the OpenGL API, while ATI has RenderMonkey. Current games consoles provide some shader functionality – Xbox allows four multipass shaders, PlayStation2 only two, but the new wave of consoles will expand this technology considerably, enabling developers to create richer visual environments.





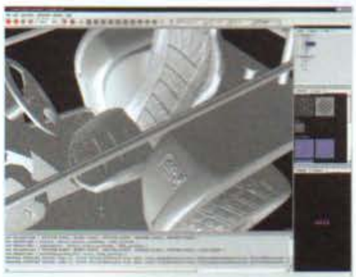


Depth of field

One of the most problematic visual effects for games is depth of field. In optical terms, every lens can only keep a limited range of objects in sharp focus; everything else will be blurred. Known as the depth of field, this range of focus is most clearly seen in films, where the area of focus will move to build atmosphere or draw the audience's attention to certain on-screen events. The same effect also occurs with the human eye, although our brain's signal processing disguises it. In the context of games, depth of field is generally ignored and everything in the game world remains in focus. An early attempt to use the technique by 3D graphics company 3dfx via its T-buffer hardware didn't prove successful, mainly because there was little reason for such a subtle yet processor-intensive effect to be used within its twitch-game market. Now, however, depth of field can be relatively simply implemented with current hardware using per-pixel shader operations which apply blurring to a scene via each pixel's depth value, or Z component. Similarly, motion blur effects can be calculated by applying additional blur to any fast-moving pixels. The biggest question remains whether developers will find any useful in-game applications for such technology.

Images: Changing a game's depth of field looks pretty but, apart from cutscenes, few developers have found an appropriate way to use the technology.



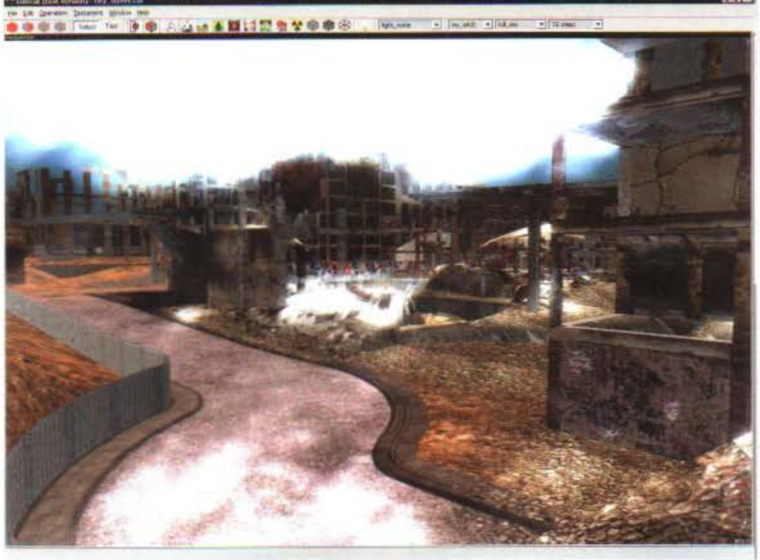




Normal maps

One of the key skills for game artists is the balance between textures and polygons. While it is relatively easy to create high-resolution models, the realtime nature of game engines means artists have to work within strict polygon budgets. One way of increasing the apparent complexity of a scene without increasing the amount of geometry is to add the appearance of surface detail to flat textures. Bump mapping was one early technique, closely followed by the processor-intensive displacement mapping. After its implementation in *Doom III*, however, normal mapping has become the buzzword for developers. This technique works by baking the surface (aka normal) data of a very high resolution model into its texture. This can then be applied to the lower resolution in-game model, which will react dynamically to any scene lighting, making the model appear more detailed but not increasing the required memory overhead significantly.

Images: A normal map captures the detail of a high resolution model and embeds it into the model's texture. When the texture is applied to a lower-resolution model in-game, it gives the effect of the high-resolution model but without using up processor resources. It can even be used in conjunction with cartoon-style rendering to give a different feel.



Post-scene processing

While most current lighting techniques involve runtime operations, there are other ways of changing the look of a scene. With post-scene processing, you operate on the final composed scene before it is sent to the monitor or TV screen. This allows subtle ways of changing the look of the game in terms of brightness or colour saturation. Previously, such effects were difficult to implement, and could only be undertaken by dynamically changing all the textures in a level. Now, however, it is possible to simply fiddle with colour saturation and palette, light flares and even graininess. In this respect, such a technique makes each frame of a computer game comparable to a composited frame of a film, which are often re-graded or re-toned by their directors in order to promote a particular look or style. As with depth-of-field techniques, it will be up to thoughtful developers to discover ways to use such a feature in a manner that will extend videogames as a medium.

Images: Post-processing lets developers take their finished scene and manipulate the colour and intensity in whatever manner they desire. Great for cutscenes; will anyone be able to use it in-game?

Soft shadows

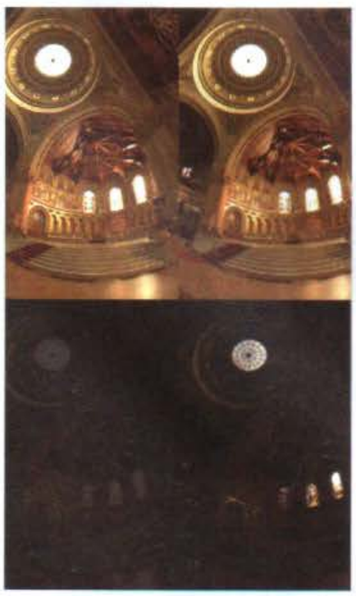
One of the last traditional CG techniques yet to be implemented within games is dynamic soft shadowing. The restrictions of realtime processing mean most games rely on hard shadows (also known as stencil or volumetric shadows, where there is a discreet boundary change from a black pixel to a colour pixel), for atmosphere. Such harsh lighting rarely occurs in nature, because the reflective properties of most materials mean ambient light is scattered everywhere in a room, creating a more gradual shadowing effect. Developers are attempting to solve the problem using per-pixel shaders and combining different shadow types such as penumbra wedges. While this is solvable for a simple scene, it becomes increasingly memory-intensive the more objects are added.













High dynamic range lighting

One of the newest features in realtime lighting is the introduction of the high dynamic range. Up to this point, all lighting has operated in a low dynamic 8bit range, in which 256 levels of light intensity are mapped. Under this system, both a light bulb and the sun would be defined as the same intensity, when in reality this is clearly not the case. High dynamic range, which can be described in either 16 or 32bit definition, overcomes this by storing colours as floating point values, meaning the sun can be 1,000 times brighter than a light bulb. It also allows developers to use other visual effects such as overbrightening (where pixel colours spill over into their neighbours) as well as bloom effects and iris response effects, which model the eye's adaptation to high contrast lighting.

Images: High dynamic range lighting allows developers to get impressionistic (left and above). In this lighting comparison (far left), in normal lighting (top images) the low dynamic range looks the same as the high dynamic range. When the light level is reduced to a 64th of its intensity (bottom images), the high dynamic range scene demonstrates the value of containing a far greater level of light intensity.


PlayStation 2
UNDERWORLD
THE ETERNAL WAR
PlayStation 2
MAKEN SHAO
DEMON SWORD
MR. GOLF

Budget report

Budget games were once hastily knocked-up 8bit titles or, more recently, re-issues of old PC titles, but a sudden resurgence has seen the phenomenon shift to PS2. **Edge** finds out why, and looks at today's examples

Budget software has always been a key factor in the growth of the videogames market, yet it has never been something the industry has been keen to promote. Too much cash, ego and prestige are bound up in high-profile titles. The fact remains that budget software is as important to consumers as top-tier games, and has proved to be a stepping stone for developers and publishers, too. For example, when two teenage brothers and their dad launched Code Masters (as it was then known), in 1988, the company made its reputation, and money, releasing new games at the low-price end of the market. The same era also saw the rise of other publishers, such as Mastertronic and Firebird, who together with Code Masters dominated the charts, releasing games at £1.99. Of course, many of these were compilations and re-releases of already successful games, but the philosophy was that beloved by all retailers: pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap.

However, this changed with the emergence of cartridge-based consoles from Sega and Nintendo in the early 1990s. Charging up to £35 for top games, their royalty system didn't allow publishers to release at budget prices. The new philosophy became 'protect your margins and charge for perceived quality.'

A dozen or so years on and, on first impressions, the situation doesn't seem to have changed much. Codemasters remains, although its budget strategy doesn't. Whether controlled overtly though the pricing structure of console manufacturers such as Sony, Microsoft, Nokia or Nintendo, or more subtly, as in the PC software market, at the top end the price of new games remains a relatively inflexible £30-40.

Cheap as chips

Somewhat hidden from view, however, the budget market has witnessed a sharp resurgence. Partly this has been driven by the success of the budget PC game market, where labels such as Sold Out and Xplosiv repackage and re-release old, or not so old, games. In a quirk of timing,



"To be successful we have to sell lots. The best way to do this is to ensure we give customers a reason for coming back"

even the Mastertronic name has been resurrected as slightly niche budget label for the re-release of PC games that have scored over 80 per cent in 'PC Gamer'. It demonstrates the commercial potential of the pile-'em-high philosophy.

The fundamental reason for the sea change is Sony. When it announced new royalty rates allowing publishers to release £20 budget games and even cheaper superbudget games a year after PlayStation2's European launch, it quietly underlined the importance of budget, even for the coolest games console in the world. Since then, dozens of publishers have dabbled in PlayStation2's budget market, with around a hundred original titles being released in the UK at £15 or below.

Successful PSone budget publisher Midas Interactive was one of the first companies to move to PlayStation2. To date, it has released more than 20 games, all priced at £14.99. According to UK sales manager **Sam Collins**, PlayStation2 publishing was simply the next step. "Our philosophy for all our budget ranges is to offer the consumer great value for money and a wide choice of games. This is simply because in order to be successful at these lower retail prices we have to sell lots of units. The best way to do this is to ensure we give customers a reason for coming back to buy another Midas game," he explains. For this reason, Midas continually refreshes its catalogue.

Considering the tight margins under which the business operates, the type of games released by budget publishers tend to have a generic feel to them, typically being either racing, tennis, golf, pool or beat 'em ups. Unlicensed products, they either sell out or are replaced on retailers' shelves when the next racing/tennis/pool game is released. But although you won't find many 40-hour thirdperson adventures or RPGs, don't be fooled into thinking such games are essentially throwaway products. Midas' *International Cue Club* has been firmly locked into the top 40 for most of the year, selling over 139,000 units in the UK alone. Such games are bread and butter



Seek And Destroy

Publisher: **Play It** Developer: **Takara/Barnhouse**
Origin: **Japan** RRP: **£10** Value for money: **5/5**

Considering its rather militaristic cover artwork, *Seek And Destroy* is actually a real cracker. A sort of tank RPG, it pits the player as the hero of the tank resistance movement of the Proto Kingdom. Invaded by the pseudo-Nazis of the Q-Stein Empire (and, yes, they do use properly modelled, if cutely styled, cartoon German WWII tanks.) Add beautifully realised cutscenes, bizarre boss levels and incredible attention to detail, and you have the ultimate budget game.



Space Invaders: Invasion Day

Publisher: **Sammy** Developer: **Taito**
Origin: **Japan** RRP: **£15** Value for money: **1/5**

A hint to what you're going to get is in the title, as this is a reworking of the basic gameplay of *Space Invaders* mixed with a hint of *Resident Evil*. Your ground-based gun turret is now a thirdperson character that wipes out layers of bizarre green invaders with pistols, shotgun or assault rifle. It is not particularly exciting to play, but with polished cinematics as well as a co-op mode and three playable characters, it could be worse. Well, a bit.



Mobile Light Force 2

Publisher: **XS Games** Developer: **Alfa Systems**
Origin: **Japan** RRP: **£13** Value for money: **3/5**

Despite the buxom young ladies on the cover, *Mobile Light Force 2* is that most Japanese of titles – a hardcore 2D arcade shoot 'em up. The trick to this short game is replay value, with six available characters each with their own special attacks. The simple goal is collect as many of the coins that materialise when enemies are destroyed. Die, and all coins are lost, but the high score table is definitely the main focus of the thing.



Super Farm

Publisher: **Ignition** Developer: **Asobo**
Origin: **France** RRP: **£20** Value for money: **3/5**

Developed from the ashes of French publisher Kalisto's demise, Asobo's *Super Farm* is quite frankly bizarre, even for the standards of budget titles. A puzzle-type melee combat game, this incredibly weird title takes the mechanics of the classic paper, scissors, stone and stretches them to breaking point. There are lots of different game modes and many hours of gameplay here, but it's difficult to see how it ever got made in the first place.





Underworld: The Eternal War

Publisher: Play It Developer: Lucky Chicken Games Origin: US RRP: £10 Value for money: 3/5

Based on the movie of the same name, *Underworld* lets you play as either a vampire or werewolf character. In a neat twist of the game's design, this means each map can be played from opposing viewpoints. While the 3D camera is restrictive and it seems much easier to play as a werewolf than a vampire, the good buddy AI, an RPG-lite attribute upgrade system and plenty of weapon types to get to grips with make *Underworld* a fun playing experience.



Air Ranger Rescue Helicopter

Publisher: Midas Developer: Ask/Garden Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 3/5

Helicopter sims that don't involve missiles aren't most gamers' idea of a good time, but while *Air Ranger Rescue Helicopter* suffers from the usual steep learning curve, it's certainly absorbing. Be prepared to learn, though, as seemingly interminable tutorials and lesson modes need to be mastered before you can hope to successfully rescue members of the public from a sticky end trapped in sinking ships, runaway trains and burning tower blocks.



Gadget Racers

Publisher: Zoo Digital Developer: Takara Origin: Japan RRP: £20 Value for money: 3/5

Mixing racing and RPG elements, *Gadget Racers* is another example of a polished and fun game from Takara. Cutesy cars wander round a hub-based world, doing tasks for the inhabitants while slowly collecting the money and flags needed to go racing. Winning races then provides parts to customise vehicles with jet engines, floatation aids and other bits and pieces which allow access to new areas of the map. You can even play car football.



Robot Warlords

Publisher: Midas Developer: DaZZ/Nexus Interact Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 3/5

Ultra-hardcore turn-based mecha strategy fans may think *Robot Warlords* is the game they've been waiting for. It's so slow to play, it makes even chess seem speedy. Your orders are enacted in realtime, however, while the level of detail with the mechs' various armaments, parts and special abilities can be adjusted and customised is just extreme. Equally amazingly, the long-running storyline is also supported with English voice acting.



for budget publishers but, as Collins points out, Midas can be more adventurous too; witness the release of hardcore chopper sim *Air Ranger Rescue Helicopter*. A top-ten release in Japan in 2002, it has proved to be a popular choice in the UK. "As well as the more obvious games, our £15 price point means we can also try something a bit different," Collins explains.

Games for a tenner

Like most other budget publishers, the majority of Midas' games are sourced from Japan, a country in which around twice as

"The trick is getting the right kind of game and then building the right kind of deal for both developer and publisher"



Psyvariar

Publisher: Xplosiv Developer: Success
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 3/5

A successful arcade 2D shoot 'em up in Japan, the PS2 version of *Psyvariar* brings together the original arcade version, *Psyvariar Medium Unit*, with a new revision that adds weapons and refinements. Highlight of the gameplay is the Buzz system, in which damage powers up the player, but there's not enough variation here to earn it classic shooter status.



Motorsiege: Warriors of Primetime

Publisher: Play It Developer: Lightspeed Games
Origin: US RRP: £10 Value for money: 3/5

Somewhere between 'Rollerball', *WipeOut* and *Twisted Metal Black*, *Motorsiege* is a surprisingly good vehicle-combat/sport game. Depth is provided by a detailed career mode in which modes are unlocked, vehicles upgraded and bosses dispatched, while various arcade modes provide simpler thrills. Exactly the sort of game budget publishing was invented to release.



Boxing Champions

Publisher: Midas Developer: D3
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 3/5

No *Ready 2 Rumble*, *Boxing Champions* is nevertheless an accessible, good-looking and intuitive boxing game. The usual combos and special character moves provide the necessary variation for players, and there are also championship, versus and survival modes. It's a shame there's no training mode, but it fulfils the pick-up-and-play criterion to the letter.



Mr Golf

Publisher: Midas Developer: DigiCube
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 3/5

OK, so it's a golf game but, taking its cue more from *Mario Golf* than *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, *Mr Golf* is a good compromise between playability and golf simulation. The cute cartoony style helps ease the tone, although the jovial voiceover soon begins to grate. Serious players will find comfort in their ability to slice, swing and spin the ball, and a wide range of clubs.

many PlayStation2 titles are released per year compared to either the US or Europe.

Phil Wright, MD of Brightspark Entertainment, acts as an agent for developers in the UK, Japan and south east Asia and has sourced games for a number of budget publishers. "It has never been a problem getting hold of games in terms of availability," he explains. "The trick is getting the right kind of game and then building the right kind of deal for both developer and publisher."

For the publisher, this means tightly controlling costs. "They all work to a strict financial plan," says Wright. "They will know how many units they are likely to sell, so this gives them a limit for how much they can pay for the rights to any game."

Another major issue is localisation. This, combined with well-known cultural differences between east and west (see **E**133), means most of the potentially available Japanese PS2 games aren't commercially viable, no matter at what price they're released. With translation costs running at around 50p per word, the overheads of localising a manual, let alone in-game menus and dialogue, from Japanese into the three main European languages can quickly mount up.

Paul Share, who launched Midas but left to set up budget publisher Phoenix, reckons the rule of thumb to break even is about 50,000 units per title. "That's the minimum I'd be looking for," he says. "You have to remember budget titles have a much longer shelf life than full-price titles, so in the fullness of time I'd expect at least 100,000 unit sales for our current titles."

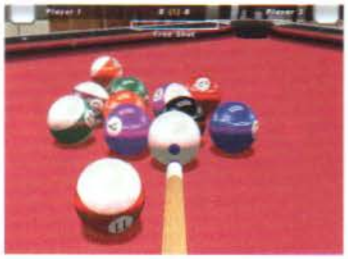




Ford Racing 2

Publisher: Empire Developer: Razorworks
Origin: UK RRP: £20 Value for money: 3/5

Pretty much what you'd expect from a game thus titled, *Ford Racing 2* brings together 32 of the best-known Ford cars and trucks to, well, race. Basic modes include Challenge, in which race wins add vehicles to your garage, and Collection, where the prize cars can be raced for trophies. Visually the game is quite strong and, more surprisingly, the car simulation is relatively good, too.



International Pool Championship

Publisher: Play It Developer: Aqua Pacific/Icon
Origin: UK RRP: £10 Value for money: 3/5

Dreadful music aside, *International Pool Championship* is everything you could want in a pool simulation, with good graphics (check out those reflective balls), some intuitive controls and extensive camera view options combined with various tournament modes and a range of skill levels. There's even a slightly anal stats menu provided for each game played.



Smash Cars

Publisher: Metro3D Developer: Creat Studio
Origin: Russia RRP: £20 Value for money: 4/5

For some reason, radio-controlled car racing has always been a strong videogame genre, and Creat's *Smash Cars* is one of the best implementations. Excellent graphics combined with a bouncy physics engine (described as 'realistic'), plenty of game modes and great environmental modelling, including the chance to hit passing humans, make this game a success.



Beach King Stunt Racer

Publisher: Davilex Developer: Davilex
Origin: Holland RRP: £20 Value for money: 3/5

Pulling stunts in a beach buggy in order to win the affection of bikini-clad ladies is the goal of *Beach King Stunt Racer*. Helped by a good graphics engine and some neat level design it's a nice attempt, but one that doesn't quite pay off. Mainly, the trouble is the difficulty of using the stunt controls, which involve rapid rotation of the sticks once a buggy is airborne.

"Even top-tier publishers are using the freedom offered by Sony's stratified royalty rates to release big-licence games cheaply"



Having already released 19 games at £9.99, Phoenix is one of the new breed of superbudget publishers that are testing the boundaries of the phenomenon. Mixing interactive DVD-style titles including *Dragon's Lair* and *Mad Dog McCree* with more traditional games such as *European Tennis Pro* and *Trickshot*, Phoenix focuses on sales in impulse outlets like video stores or supermarkets. Despite the low price of its games, it expects to branch out in 2004, launching an Xbox budget range.

A similarly aggressive stance is being taken by budgeteer Play It. Launched in 2003 by **Mark Cale**, founder of veteran UK developer System 3, it's another publisher to embrace the £9.99 price point. While the likes of Phoenix target the supermarket-shopping mother, Play It is after the hardcore gamer. "I believe our big advantage over many of our competitors is that quite simply we are gamers first and foremost," Cale says. This philosophy has led Play It to assemble a particularly interesting selection of games. One launch title was *Cel Damage Overdrive*, a PlayStation2 version of Pseudo Interactive's Xbox launch game *Cel Damage*, originally released by EA.

"Anyone who has played the game will testify it's ground-breaking, and as a gamer I loved it," Cale explains. "To be fair to all parties, I think the Xbox version found itself lost in a sea of monster titles. We were able to give the developer the chance to be a big fish in our smaller business." Another coup for the firm was securing the rights to *Underworld* – a game based on the recently released Kate Beckinsale vampire/werewolf movie. "Much bigger companies than Play It were chasing the title," Cale confirms. "I think we succeeded because not only do we have great relations with the companies behind the game but also because the developer can see the potential of Play It to sell more games."

There is a feeling, however, that budget PlayStation2 publishers are becoming victims of their own success. Companies such Oxygen, Dreamcatcher, Metro3D, XS, Sammy, Agetec and Davilex are now publishing for PlayStation2, adding to the competition. Some early entrants, such as German publisher SWING!, have already floundered while others, including Ignition and Zoo Digital, are currently rethinking their prices. Meanwhile, even top-tier publishers such as Ubisoft are using the freedom offered by Sony's stratified royalty rates to release big licence games cheaply. Recent examples include *Charlie's Angels* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which, having missed the marketing windows offered by their respective film licences, were quietly pushed into retail at £20. (*Prince Of Persia* sales also picked up dramatically when it was promoted at this price, which speaks volumes about cost.)

In a market where originality and quirkiness are too often squeezed out by commercial concerns, it's time to embrace budget games. Sure, you won't find the next *Final Fantasy*, but you might find something you enjoy even more.



HardHitter2

Publisher: Midas Developer: Magical Company
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 2/5

The third tennis game from Magical to be released in the UK, *HardHitter2* suffers from the same basic problems that afflict the whole series: there's little control over the serve, the player is slow to control and the animation of opponents makes it hard to know whether they will return a ball until it's too late. This and the awful dialogue apart, however, it's a nice enough looking game.



Maken Shao: Demon Sword

Publisher: Midas Developer: Atlus/R&D
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 1/5

Originally available as a FPS for Dreamcast, the PS2 port of *Maken X* is a huge disappointment. The main problem is a switch from firstperson to thirdperson action. The terrible animation, which has been quickly introduced to fill the gap, makes this otherwise interesting and stylistically perverse sword-based game just a nightmare to play.



Bust-A-Bloc

Publisher: Midas Developer: D3 Publisher
Origin: Japan RRP: £15 Value for money: 2/5

A version of *Breakout* updated in 3D for the new generation, *Bust-A-Bloc* suffers from that most basic of problems – the ball moves too slowly. Partly this is because of a mode where you can spin the paddle to spin and speed up the ball, but it's so fiddly as to unbalance the whole game. Apart from that, however, there are plenty of different modes as well as an extensive power-up system.



European Tennis Pro

Publisher: Phoenix Developer: Magical Company
Origin: Japan RRP: £10 Value for money: 1/5

If Magical's *HardHitter2* was bad, then its *European Tennis Pro* is awful. A cut-down version of the more expensive game, it has a weak training and hints system, which makes it even harder to get to grips with. What it does offer are singles and doubles play, along with five different court surfaces as well as World Tour and Exhibition modes, far fewer than in *HardHitter2*.





By approval only

Part three of **Edge**'s look at the world of game development takes a look at the issues surrounding a little-known step in the console scene: the submission and approval process...

You sit in Sony's massive beige cube in Foster City, California, holding 18 months of hard work burned onto a single silvery disc. The reflective sticker stuck slightly askew on your chest is printed with your name, and the name of your devco, in neat block capitals.

An enormous widescreen TV faces you down a long wooden conference table. Arranged around it at neat intervals are your external producer, thirdparty account manager and, most frightening of all, a member of the product evaluation group.

Of the three, you're most worried about the PEG guy, who wears an expression of studied nonchalance. He's never seen your game before, but a bad word from him could kill it. It's his job to try to pick the AAA titles from any 'uncompetitive' trash that an unscrupulous publisher might be trying to shovel through. With minor adjustments, it's a scene familiar to all three major console manufacturers, and although it may seem unusual for Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo to reserve the right to refuse titles from thirdparty publishers – the PC obviously lacks this process – in the tightly controlled environments of the high-end console it's standard.

An unusual state of affairs

Joe Booth, director of European product development at BAM Entertainment, summarises the basic process: "Generally, you submit code at the early concept stage, they evaluate this based on the strength of the idea, where the competition is, what the schedule is and the developer's track record. Typically, they give conditional approval which allows them a final check on the code."



The Microsoft way

Microsoft requires publishers to submit their initial game proposal for concept approval on a region-by-region basis. Each certification team works to the same set of standards and often share knowledge on proposed titles, but regional issues are taken into account and the suitability of each title for the specific region is examined in detail. A baseball game would have a harder time being approved in Europe than the US, for example. Other factors are exclusive content, Xbox Live support or if the game focuses on Xbox as the lead platform – identikit ports are frowned upon unless the game is a massive franchise or a huge hit on a competing console.

Another factor is the business side of the publisher, although this often only applies to new/smaller publishers. For example, if a US-based publisher wants to apply for concept approval in Europe it would also want to know how it plans to manage the sales, distribution and marketing of the title in that territory.

Before duplication, it also requires the publisher to submit for certification, when Microsoft will test the game against its technical standards to make sure the title is bug free.

But the most interesting issue was how Microsoft approached approval in its plans for Xbox, considering the PC lacks this entire process. **Adrian Curry** from Microsoft explains the firm's initial position and how it has changed.

How did Microsoft view the approval process when the company launched the Xbox?

When you create a new format your launch titles are a critical factor in the consumer's decision to own your console. You want a fairly broad spectrum of titles covering a range on genres that will be attractive to your targeted demographic. It would be no good for the consumer, the publisher or the format holder to launch with five racing titles and zero sports games, so you need to ensure you have an even spread of attractive titles.

How has the software-approval process at Microsoft changed since Xbox launched?

As our installed base has grown, so has our target demographic. The early adopters were hardcore gamers who wanted killer apps like *Halo* and *Project Gotham*. Over the course of the console's lifecycle we have widened this demographic to include titles for a slightly younger audience such as *Finding Nemo* or family-orientated titles such as *The Sims*.

The basic aim is to make certain that no large bugs or technical problems still exist in the game but, more specifically, the approval process is a method of ensuring that new titles coming through the pipeline meet content quality standards before they reach the shelf, and an unwary consumer.

"When you are marketing a console to the mass consumer market you need to have titles that match the current campaign you are working with as well as appealing to your target demographic," says **Adrian Curry**, account manager for Xbox developer programs at Microsoft. "If at launch you are trying to say 'this is a hardcore console for hardcore gamers' and then you launch *Tinkletum's Adventures in La La Land*, it doesn't exactly underline your marketing message, does it?"

Approval is often conditional, and a game can be rejected right up until the last moment, although the further into development it has progressed, the more expensive and embarrassing it is for all concerned. On the flip side, rejection is neither uncommon nor a final blow to a game's chances of reaching the shelves – even hugely successful titles have been rejected more than once for reasons that vary from a seriously derivative concept to an unacceptably low frame rate to a failure to display the words 'Licensed by Nintendo' for a full second on GameCube startup.

The more crowded the genre the game is aiming for, the more likely it will be judged harshly. The logic when approving a stealth shooter, for instance, is simple: 'We have *Metal Gear Solid* and we have *Splinter Cell*, why do we need your game?' The odd game will become 'exclusive' to certain consoles because it could not find approval on other platforms. The risible *Charlie's Angels* will likely never see a US PS2 release, despite being published on GameCube in Europe and the US.

A rejected game can only be resubmitted if 'significant improvements' have been made, and any additional funding to bring the game up in quality is at the publisher's own risk. In the final equation, if the publisher believes in the title they will continue to fund it. If they believe the cost is too high, it's dropped. The approval process could be seen as the point where a creative industry becomes a business.

The rationale

The aim is to prevent a console from becoming flooded with poor titles, to stop good titles being overlooked in the face of similar but inferior titles, and to protect the individual console brands.

"If you look back 15 or 20 years to the 8bit home computers, before consoles were the dominant format, there was no control over what was released to market and it was a pretty grim picture," says Curry. "With so many titles on the shelf, the business model for any publisher was extremely tough, delivering them an ever-smaller cut of the action. Also, with the format holder only making money on the hardware, this has generally kept prices high and made it harder to sell to the massmarket."

Eddy Di Luccio, QA manager at Codemasters, offers another reason: "Since the game will ultimately





reflect upon the console, hardware manufacturers need to ensure that a certain level of quality is maintained. The approval process ensures a benchmark in quality levels." The assumption here is that a consumer who buys a bad PS2 game will then believe that the PS2 is a bad system. It may seem illogical considering that few people who buy a bad CD assume that all music is terrible, but perhaps it's a sign of how insular games remain. A glance at any number of online forums will see the kind of irrational brand loyalty which would make a publisher fear releasing poor games.

"It's important to remember that the hardware manufacturers generally lose money on hardware sold," says **Reid Schneider**, producer of *Splinter Cell* at Ubisoft and now at EA. "Their goal is to make up that lost money with hit software, so they need to be able to veto a bad title when it comes down the pipeline."

As well as weeding out games that will never become viable products, the approval process also gives the hardware manufacturers a way to push average titles up a notch, or to make sure the developer squeezes more out of superior hardware instead of creating a simple port.

"In order to have successful systems, the software needs to support and showcase their technology," says Schneider. "Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo do not want a port of a game that looks great on a competitor's system but weak on theirs. This forces a publisher to invest time and money in a game they may have just wanted to get out the door as quickly as possible."

The aim is to prevent a console from becoming flooded with poor titles, to stop good titles being overlooked in the face of similar but inferior titles, and to protect brands

'The big three' vs 'averageware'

It is the subjective element of the approval process which has recently become more of an issue, with all three platform manufacturers trying to ensure their system looks its best. As the dominant platform, Sony has changed its focus as it tries to reduce the number of games released on the PS2 while increasing the quality of those titles that do make it through.

"There has been a significant shift in attitude recently, especially at Sony," says Booth. "Gamers are much more educated, and they just aren't buying shit games any more. The market wants fewer titles and higher quality, and I think Sony is representing this by refusing to approve average titles – I don't know of a case where a fantastic game has been refused, but where it does cause frustration is for developers who

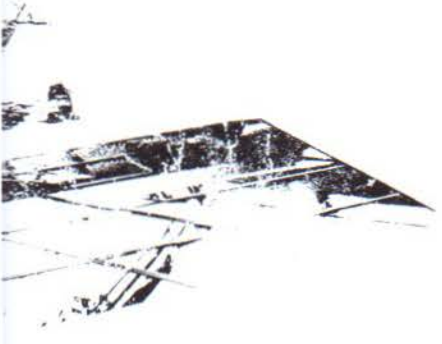
The Nintendo way

Nintendo is happy to see a game only at gold master, and the product can only be approved or rejected – there are no forms of conditional approval. There are slight differences between all three territories, but using Nintendo Of America as an example outlines the basic structure.

After the publisher submits the game, it is sent to NOA lot check, an engineering team that tests the game for any functional defects. When the software passes NOA lot check, the game is sent to Nintendo Co Ltd (NCL) in Japan. NCL engineering performs lot check testing again, and if it passes, sample game discs are produced and sent back to the publisher for a final check. If, after checking the sample discs, no errors are found, the game proceeds to duplication. If at any point during this process the game fails a NCL or NOA lot check or licensee verification test, the licensee will need to re-submit the game.

Nintendo also provides several optional services a developer can use, such as milestone evaluation, which offers feedback on the game during production, and first impression testing, which offers feedback from evaluators who have never seen the game before. However, the most useful is the Mario Club, an experienced group of testers at Nintendo who can act as a useful middle ground between focus testing and in-house QA.

Mario Club scores games in five weighted categories, to give the developer a score rating from 1-100. Some of the categories such as visuals (ten per cent) and audio (per per cent) are self-explanatory, but others require more explanation and offer some insight into how Nintendo judges a product's worth. Ease of play (20 per cent) looks at controller configuration, play response, play control/feel, game difficulty and balance, clarity of game objectives, game tempo/flow. Game composition (20 per cent) examines rules/guidelines, consistency, realism, concept execution, variety of objectives or actions to perform. Finally there's the elusive overall satisfaction (40 per cent), which covers game progression, accomplishment and reward, player customisation, replay and extended play value, originality and immersion.





The Sony way

Sony prefers the publisher to begin by submitting a concept submission, usually a cut-down version of the design outlining the proposed game. These are reviewed by the product evaluation group, then presented to Sony's in-house approval committee during regular product proposal meetings. Sony is the only one of the big three to offer conditional approval instead of a simple pass or fail. It bases this decision on the publisher and developer's track record, the licence (if appropriate), and the proposal itself. The types of approval Sony grants are:

Full approval
The golden ticket of the approval process at SCEA, full approval grants the submitted title an SCEA product code and when completed, it can go directly to Sony's QA for final testing. Only established developers or publishers with a proven track record have a chance of receiving immediate full approval.

Review conditional approval
This indicates that the proposed title is approved to go to QA and an SCEA product code will be assigned to the proposed title but the publisher is required to submit work-in-progress builds. These builds may be submitted at any time but a first playable or pre-alpha, alpha and beta build must be submitted to fulfil the review conditional approval.

Feature conditional approval
This indicates that the proposed title is approved to go to QA and an SCEA product code will be assigned to the proposed title but the publisher is required to fulfil specific requirements as outlined by SCEA. These requirements could be anything from achieving a specified frame rate to eliminating visible seams in geometry.

In addition, the publisher is required to submit reviewable materials as scheduled by SCEA thirdparty account management, and subsequent reviews may be scheduled by SCEA.

Milestone
Milestone approval is reserved for titles that have not yet met SCEA quality standards. They do not receive an SCEA product code and the publisher must schedule a revaluation date with SCEA account management if it wants its title to hit the shelves. During this revaluation, if concerns have been addressed, the title will be upgraded to a review or feature conditional approval status, but if large issues remain then the title will be rejected.

Non-approval
The death knell, non-approval (a deliberate semantic avoidance of 'rejection') indicates that the proposed title has been rejected due to unsatisfactory quality issues. It can't be re-submitted unless significant, substantive revisions have been made, and any further investment in development and promotion is at the publisher's own risk.

have good ideas in competitive genres and the game is not significantly advanced to show its strengths."

This attitude reflects that of most publishers and developers – they see the approval process as a form of insurance for the industry as a whole. However, if the process is working, why do seriously substandard games continue to be published?

Curry offers one explanation: "Approval has to be given at the early stages of development, sometimes before any code has been written, just going by the developer's reputation and maybe the publisher's licensed property. Sometimes a game that sounded like a great idea 18-24 months ago might not turn out to be a winner in the end. There are many, many reasons why a good idea goes sour, but if the game sounds like a howler at the start it's unlikely to turn into a real gem."

Other reasons are not so clear cut, and on the surface it could be seen to be a conflict of interests that one major software publisher maintains a veto over titles offered by its competition. While other creative industries are happy to let a low-quality product simply disappear of its own volition, videogames seem positively Orwellian in the level of control the hardware manufacturers try to exert. So much so that European law has been modified to begin to address the possibility of negative consequences.

"The EU ruled a few years ago that it is anti-competitive for a hardware manufacturer such as Sony or Nintendo to control content once a publisher has a licence to publish on a platform," explains Booth. "Sony got around this initially for the PS2 by not issuing a full licence to publish (or develop) until your first title had been approved by them – thereby giving them some initial control over content. But once you pass this you are free to publish any titles you like."

> "Fewer developers working for fewer publishers is seen as a means of guaranteeing fewer titles of higher quality that generate more revenue, making the industry friendlier"

The fallout

Fewer developers working for fewer publishers is seen as a means of guaranteeing fewer titles of higher quality that generate more revenue, making the industry friendlier for consumers and investors. "Flooding a market dilutes the market share for each title which, when coupled with ever-rising development costs, is no a good thing for the publisher," Curry explains. "A lower return on investment leads to the publisher trying to

lower the development costs and time for future titles, which in turn leads to lower game quality."

The approval process is one element in this possible future as, in practice, it makes it increasingly difficult for new developers and publishers to get a break. With the hardware manufacturers wanting to release fewer games, publishers are forced to look for bigger hits. These titles require higher production values and bigger budgets, which makes the publishers ever more risk averse. This in turn means developers are looking for more established genres and more mainstream concepts to try to convince sceptical marketing teams that their game is worth the investment.

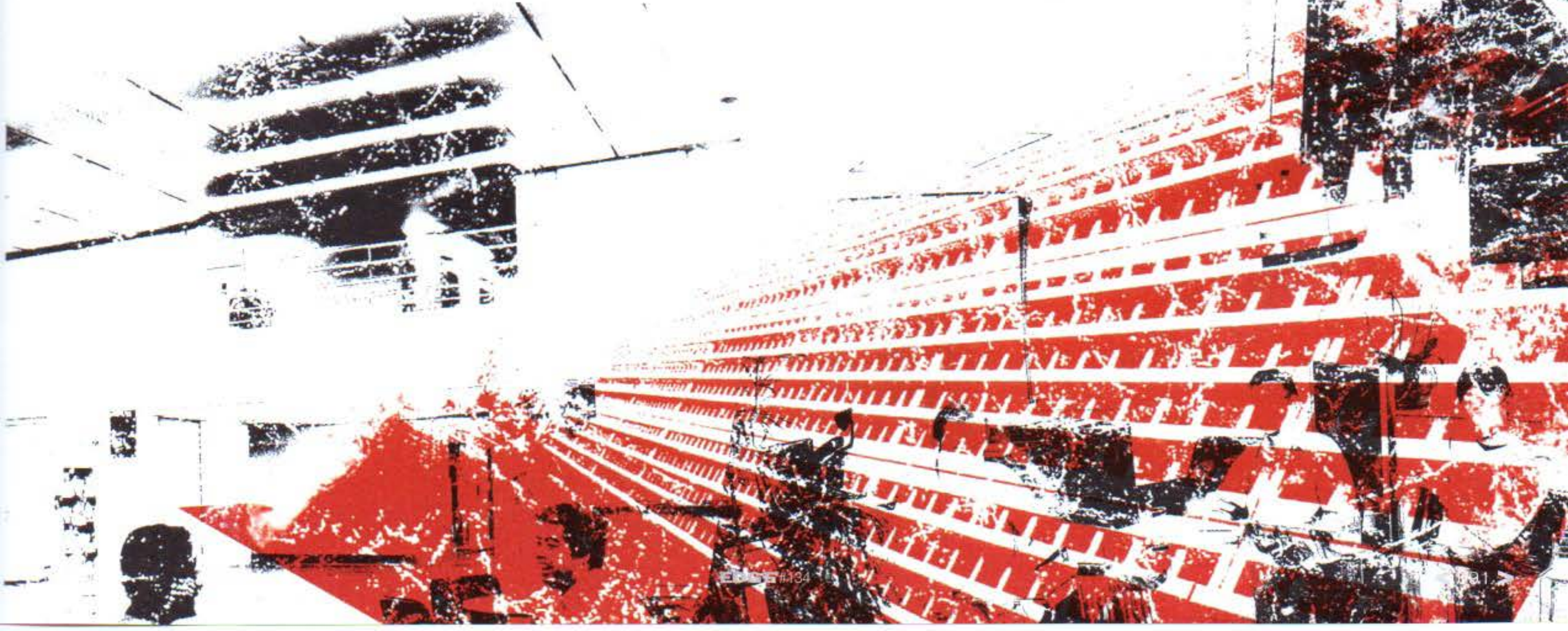
Schneider offers another reason why it is becoming very hard for developers who have not shipped a PS2 game to compete in the current marketplace: "Sony is becoming increasingly demanding on the publishers and developers to put out high-quality games. At this point in the hardware cycle they are expecting products that make the PS2 shine. Sony also faces mounting threats from Microsoft and Nintendo and they do not want inferior games on their system. As of right now, Sony is also clearly the market leader and they are able to pick and choose their titles."

In an ideal world, where the approval process is objective and accurate, it will weed out average products, guarantee us a steady flow of triple-A titles and ensure the videogame industry continues to thrive both artistically and financially. In a dystopian alternate reality, if the process utterly fails, it will drive the final nail into the coffin of the small or independent developer and guarantee an endless stream of 'safe' generic products with high production values and little else.

Booth offers one final insight: "Look at what happened to Atari and the VCS, or what's happening in Japan where the market is falling by ten to 15 per cent per year. There are no guarantees that there will always be such a demand for videogames. What happens when someone pays £40 for a crap game – does it turn them off that developer, the publisher, the hardware platform or games as a whole? Ultimately it's the hardware vendor's role to look at this. It costs them significantly in the short term to have this policy in place. They lose royalties on all the games they reject, as they make their royalties on manufacture whether the game sells or not, and they invest serious time and energy to manage this process – so ultimately they must think there is a good reason to do this."

All of which means the approval process is unlikely to disappear any time soon, and although the future is almost guaranteed to be somewhere in the murky middle ground, it is one aspect of console game development that deserves more attention than it currently receives.

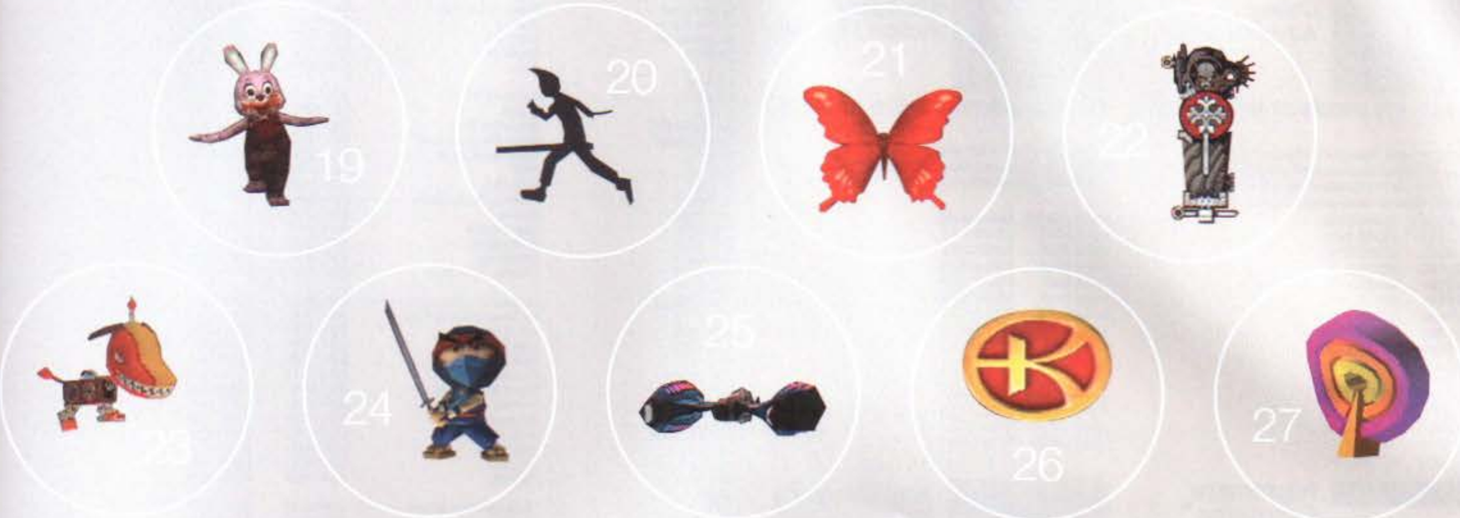




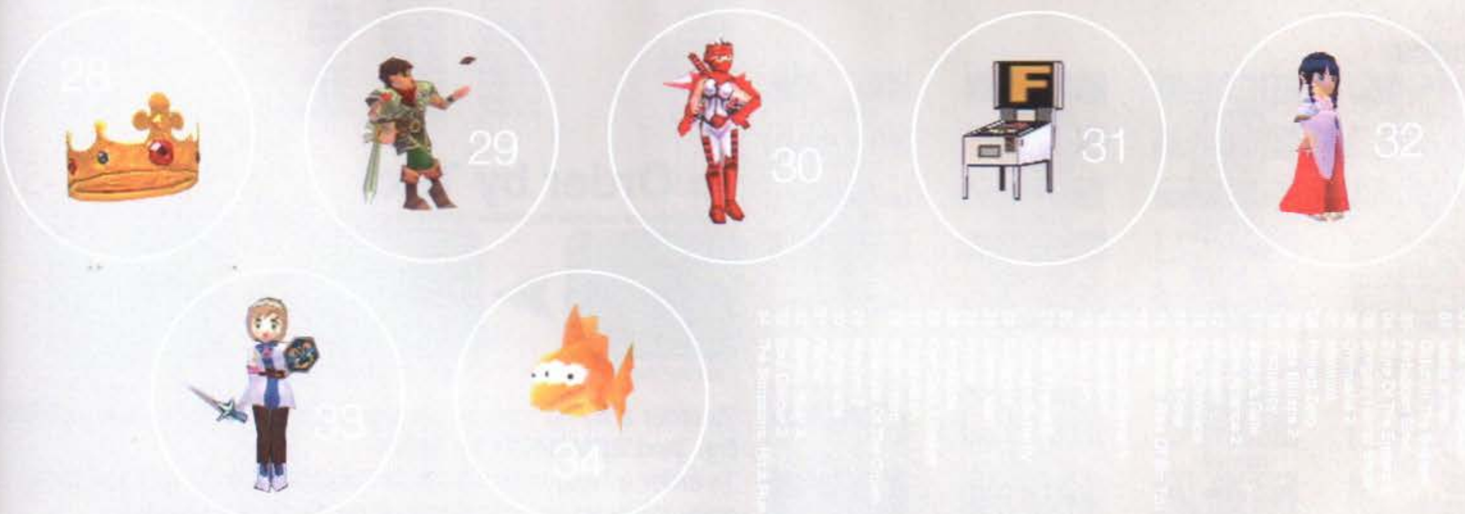


In memoriam





Some games live on in your PS2's memory longer than they do in yours. That tiny extra flourish can make an icon unforgettable. A coy wiggle, a tireless jog, a dejected slump. Remember?



Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Grand Theft Auto III

(PS2/Xbox) Rockstar

The Xbox iteration's custom soundtrack facility has delivered a new slant. Taking down your enemies to The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' can't be beaten.



Lemmings

(PC) Dice Multimedia

Re-visiting the old cliff-jumper one evening, we discovered that 1am comes around very quickly when tunneling, bashing, climbing and building.



Project Gotham Racing 2

(Xbox) Microsoft

The least obvious rhythm-action game around, with left/right and brake/gas for instruments, screaming tyres for a bassline. Every lap is a symphony, then.



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004

(PC/PS2/Xbox/GC) EA Sports

Supremely addictive, if you're in the mood. The sheer frustration of having your golf bag kicked around Spyglass Hill by Jim Furyk has rarely been matched.



One more time

Why we love repetitive games

Well, that's not entirely true. We love a *certain kind* of repetitive game. It's like there's good stupid and bad stupid. And good repetitive is just plain good.

Why, then? It's certainly a kind of Zen – that warm, solid bedrock of a second-nature operation being repeated over and over to the point of instinct. There's physical warmth on top of that, too, and maybe it's peculiar to people who have played games for a long, long time: it gets the blood flowing to those chilly fingers and forearms. Tapping away like you're in the Morse code championships is a good source of natural heat. It's Ready Brek for fingers, provided they've been tempered through years of mashing the pad at escape velocity and cradling those twin analogues like very important children.

There's honesty in repetition, too. You can't hide what you are if you're the same 30 seconds being repeated on a loop. *Serious Sam* (below) has to bare its pump-action manifesto within minutes. No hiding behind mini-games, sleight of gameplay or clumsy attempts to meld genres like so much poor recycling. You have to set out your stall, wear it on your sleeve, and hope that the player wants to stay: no timewasters please. It's much cleaner than having to suck on a game until the ten-hour mark before realising that particular gobstopper has a core that's been injected with piss. Thanks to this speed-dating honesty you can tell within five minutes whether you'll gel with what's on offer.

And the pay off for single-button shallowness is often a wealth of pizzazz. Games like *Otogi 2* (p104) or *Bujingai* (p110) or any of the new wave of demanding shooters that offer exponential high scores in return for a thesis on single game mechanics: any concerns about longevity soon vanish in the face of so much explosive beauty.

Then there's the therapy of it all: returning to a repetitive game is a lot like alphabetising your CD collection. Remedial manual labour that allows your brain to go and have a cigar and a nice long bath. And, finally, there's the necessary relaxation on behalf of the player. You've got to be able to let go and just cha-cha-cha with the one-note rhythm. Put your brain into freefall, and let the gravity of a choice-free system do the work for you.

Any other reasons? Probably, but who needs more depth than this? Sometimes we just don't.













Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **Square Enix** Price: **£40** Release: **March 12**





Although the towns and villages are lavish, there's next to no interaction – you can't enter most buildings or open chests or cupboards





Ignore the GBAs for a moment, even though the game insists on them as a requirement. Forget about the singleplayer too, even though it transpires to be more simple and satisfying than expected. The real question is how *Crystal Chronicles* shapes up as a straight multiplayer. Initial observations are hopeful: teams of two to four players (with two to four GBAs, and two to four link-up cables) are supported, and saves can be opened in both single and multiplayer modes. Closer inspection, however, reveals a shambles.

"One of the most beautiful worlds ever created on a console, heavy with atmosphere and laden with the treasures of the Final Fantasy heritage"



In the singleplayer game, the chalice is carried for you by a Moogle, making exploration and battling far more dynamic and flexible than in the multiplayer mode. And you can customise him with spray-paint

Say, for example, you've played a few hours on the singleplayer and are keen to rope in some assistance. Nineteen phone calls, two cancelled Saturdays and five dud batteries later, you're all assembled. Although you can add your friends into your ongoing adventure as new characters, they simply won't be strong enough to survive as your companions. Or, more viciously, you may be able to battle through a level, watching them die during every battle and reviving them at every lull, only to discover that you simply can't beat the boss. When this happens there's no retreat. The only options available to you are to lose to the boss over and over, or reset the game. And so an hour of effort is squandered. For Square Enix to have designed a game which requires so much organisation, expense and co-operation on the part of the players and then make it probable – not possible but probable – that all that effort will be wasted is unforgivable.

Phantasy Star Online solved this dilemma by giving strong characters the means to protect weaker players, to put them on a fast track to EXP heaven. *FF:CC* strips you of that possibility by removing all your magic at the end of every dungeon. Each spell must be re-found on each level, left randomly as a pick-up by defeated enemies. It's an idea with potential, but delivered with a total lack of balance. It's possible to go through a whole level without finding Cure, making it impossible to survive the boss encounter at the end. And it makes a mockery of the press shots of four players working in complex co-operation – one player hanging back and healing, while two more tag team a powered-up Thundara as he hammers at the enemies with a broadsword. It's only in the very last stages of the level that you'll have any hope of pulling off any moves of that sort, and by then things will be too cramped and chaotic to encourage it.

Any why? It's because of that blighted bubble. Every multiplayer, single-screened RPG has had to wrestle with how to keep everyone together, but *FF:CC*'s solution is ill-considered. Players have to stay within a protective bubble, centred on the crystal chalice. This must be carried by one player, and for no appreciable reason whatsoever it halves their speed, forcing other players to trot back and forth around him like puppies who need to go out for a leak. Should anyone venture outside the bubble, they take damage. This might seem fair, if it wasn't for the fact that the chalice can be knocked out of the carrier's hands by an attack, which ca[n] leave it in a position which is both strategically frustrating and difficult for the













In singleplayer, magic globes are combined to create new spells. Multiplayer characters must overlap their reticules to trigger elaborate attacks. It rarely works in the heat of battle

camera. If it happens in a boss fight, then it may be impossible to retrieve it and battles can be lost purely because of it.

Now, let's remember about those GBAs again. What are they for? They're supposed to prevent the menus from cluttering the main screen and do away with those irritating multiplayer moments when someone wants to fuss with their inventory, since whenever someone is using their GBA their character is tugged along by the bubble. In practice, no one will dare resort to checking their menus during battle, since it's likely to mean a rapid death and, for the rest of the time, there's not all that much to be done – certainly nothing which couldn't have been made tolerable as a traditional, pause-screen menu system. At no point will you find yourself thinking: "Thank God I'm playing this with the GBA's tiny D-pad!"

Played on its own demanding terms, *Crystal Chronicles* offers something unique: the chance for your living room to experience the kind of convivial, epic co-operation that MMORPG players take for granted. It offers one of the most beautiful worlds ever created on a console, heavy with atmosphere and wonder, laden with the treasures of the *Final Fantasy* heritage. However, it asks too much expense and hassle and it inflicts too many setbacks, frustrations and restrictions to come close to being a fair exchange.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

The way to do it



There is so much potential in *Crystal Chronicles* that seeing it go to waste is almost painful. There are three ways to get the best from it. Firstly, play singleplayer. It shapes up as a simple and pleasurable adventure – *Final Fantasy* relaxing by the beach. For multiplayer, either assemble a team and play together – and only together – from scratch, or buy a copy of the game each and power up your character in singleplayer before coming together for the occasional rumble. Also remember that if a dungeon gets too tough, you can switch to singleplayer and waltz through on its much easier settings.

Armed And Dangerous

Format: **Xbox (version tested), PC** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Planet Moon Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**125, **E**130











Your pair of team mates seem to have been included for the sake of the cut-scenes only, due to their questionable usefulness in battle





Wing dings

The jumper pack appears from time to time and brings with it a welcome change of pace, allowing you to boost yourself up and glide huge distances. It makes you a far more confident marauder, turning the combat from suicidal to only slightly less suicidal as you yo-yo in and out of the fray as a highly elusive target.





Every handful of levels is punctuated with a stint of base-defending from the luxury of a mini-gun pod. Those dots in the distance? They're formations of enemy troops about to spill over the hill

With less than a year between official announcement and release, you'd be right to be a little suspicious of the quality of the final product. Sure, that sentiment applies to *Armed And Dangerous*, but it's far from an instant dismissal. What Planet Moon Studios has is the groundwork for an absolutely stunning game, but no more. It has energy in abundance, but needed a little more time.

What it does have, to its credit, is an incredible amount of scale, accuracy and character. Levels seem culled from an RTS, set across fat expanses of land that are populated with enemy-generating barracks and allow for a variety of approaches to the fray, as well as rockets and mini-gun emplacements to capture. There's more than a little resemblance to Planet Moon's previous work, *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*.

It's been geared – well – for playful chaos. Snipers can peck away at you from a mile away and you can return fire with your own scoped rifle, the auto-aiming vindaloo rocket launcher or any number of imaginative secondary weapons. Which brings us to the game's next strength: uncompromising personality, even up to the Celtic flavour of the soundtrack. The humour may have a worrying ratio of miss to hit, but it's more than welcome. Standout examples include the 'beautiful' leper village or Jonesy's constant putdowns from the prescient Book Of Rules. Pick your own moments – there are plenty.

We need more games like this – ones tha are confident and individual – but we need them to be less roughly hewn. The core of th game is solid, but the way it's applied throughout the levels just isn't interesting enough. Bar the occasional change of environment, the levels and objectives feel fa too similar. There are some nasty, rushed edges to the visuals, too, both in and out of cut-scenes. In tandem with these are some viciously placed save points and a handful of spots where it's easy to run dry of the ammo needed to take down some of the tougher robots. It's a martyr to a deadline, it seems.

As with *Metal Arms*, it's a pleasingly unashamed thirdperson shooter, content to wallow in the reckless blitz of out-and-out combat, backed by colourful, thoughtful weapons and a sense of humour. What it lacks is that panache, that final glaze of finish and variety to elevate it from a likeable, limite accomplishment to a full-on bouncy castle of loveable, crazed gunplay.

Edge rating: **Seven** out of te

Forbidden Siren

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **SCEJ** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (Japan) March 19 (UK)**

Previously in **E**129, **E**132

Anyone who's been surviving the horror since the genre's PlayStation inception will know *Silent Hill*, and the disconcerting power of the air-raid siren. Its reappearance is no coincidence: *Forbidden Siren* is directed by the man responsible for Konami's original terror trip. There's an equally uneasy cacophony on display here, though: the dubbed voice acting of the PAL release (see 'An earthquake? Blimey!') If you feel you can bear the ill effects of misplaced localisation, then add a point to the score at the end.

That jarring dub, though, is so prominent because of the strength of *Siren*'s characters. Photorealism rarely works, but here it's been implemented in such a way as to produce some stunning, deliberately shaky cut-scenes and affecting character models. Who needs a cheap-shot orchestral stab to scare the player when that man over there really looks like he's been sobbing blood?

Siren's atmosphere is a typical one of smothering fog and invasive crackles of static, but it's raised to a new level by the Sightjack option – the ability to tune into nearby Shibito (zombified villagers) and view the world through their monstrous eyes. Initially, this seems like a revolution, but it's not as empowering as it appears. It's exhausting, and not just because of the frenzied panting and muffled gibbering inside the head of a monster: playing *Siren* the way it is meant to be played requires the patience of a glacier.

Confrontations are deadly, so using the Sightjack should be vital. However, trying to gather more than just cursory information about the environment using it is often far too confusing, requiring the monitoring of four or more slow-moving, head-turning Shibito. It's an awkward juggling act that only becomes useful once you already have a good grasp of the environment, usually gathered by several frustrating trial-and-error deaths. Thanks to *Siren*'s looping knot of a storyline, however, the Sightjack slowly comes into its own once you're familiar with the environments. It's a brilliant tool, but one that works best only when you know where you are.

Siren's grand ideas are to be applauded, but savouring them takes effort. If you can invest the time, and look away in all the right places – such as away from the genre's trademarks of outrageously bad combat and dogsbody objectives – then there's a uniquely suffocating horror experience waiting to be survived.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten















The hunting rifle brings with it a welcome empowerment, but you can't use it without equipping the sight. It takes several seconds to zoom in fully, meaning that close-quarters combat becomes a farce: it's impossible to defend yourself despite toting a massive gun



The plot takes in one of the grandest arcs ever in a game. The episodic structure – replaying a 'loop' reveals details and sub-episodes – allows it to unfurl with the intricacy of a novel

An earthquake? Blimey!

This isn't some ungrateful whinge against a publisher tampering with the box art: *Siren*'s dubbed soundtrack really does puncture the atmosphere. With such an accomplished reliance on Japanese faces, words and locations to drive the coherence, the lack of a subtitled original language option is a damaging, and seemingly unnecessary, oversight. Imagine a cockney-dubbed version of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's movie 'Amelie', and you get the idea.

SOCOM II: US Navy SEALs

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **Zipper Interactive** Price: **£40 (without headset, £50 with)** Release: **March 12**

Previously in **E125**













Stealth plays a significant part in some of the missions, and the use of a nightsight can be essential. The enemy AI responds intelligently to any alarms you set off, so care is needed



Sony has overhauled the online frontend, making it easier to find and chat with other players, before choosing friends and forming clans. Lessons have been learned, it seems, from Xbox Live

Playing *SOCOM II* without the benefit of an internet connection can be a puzzling experience. Although everything here is commendably detailed, buildings disappear into a classic PS2 pea-souper uncomfortably close up. Areas seem oddly like arenas, and although both enemies and allies are much smarter than they were in the first game, it's not uncommon to feel like you're shooting at cardboard targets in some kind of practice range. Which, of course, you are. The *SOCOM* series is Sony's flagship online shooter and this sequel, arriving less than a year after the original game, was never meant to be focused on the straightforward singleplayer mode. Instead it has been designed to deliver 16-player team deathmatches in a series of psuedo-realistic SEALs-vs-terrorists scenarios.

A kind of *Counter-Strike*-lite, *SOCOM II*'s appeal is improved by the inclusion of 12 new multiplayer maps, subtle tweaks to the original ten arenas and a friendlier frontend for the online play. Online gamers can now use a grenade launcher to hilarious effect, and outdoor environments add an organic element to sneaking. It's still far from perfect – the online chat can't equal Xbox Live conversations by a long shot, and the frequent use of voice modding by coy players doesn't help the experience, leaving the player with the sensation of being surroundec by Daleks. The PS2 was never designed to run giant online multiplayer frag sessions, anc it shows: the enjoyment seems to teeter constantly on the edge of slowing down or stalling, although the threat rarely materialises Players who shelled out for the original game may feel as if they're paying full price for wha almost amounts to a bug-fixing and map-enhancing update.

This doesn't change the fact that the concept behind the online play is as sound a it was in the first game. There's still nothing o PS2 to equal the thrill of taking out an unaware online rival with a sniper rifle, or taking part in a well co-ordinated assault on the enemy team's defences. Still, those with PCs will feel hampered by the lack of accuracy and graphical oomph, and Xbox owners won't find anything to compare to *Halo* (offline) or *Counter-Strike* (on). It's entertaining, but if *SOCOM II* is the pinnacle Sony's online achievement – and it is – then Microsoft has convincingly won the online battle. At least for this round.

Edge rating: Six out of t

James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **EA** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**125, **E**132

EA has clearly thrown everything at its latest Bond blockbuster, but the result is patchy at best. We've been here before, of course: lavish production values, a big spend on voice talent, licences and 'named' actors and the now-familiar multiple-game-styles approach to design. The evident hard work, glossy visuals and strength of the Bond IP alone make you want to love it, but the love affair will last until about the second mission.

Early in its inception *Everything or Nothing* was an FPS, but this perspective, it was decided, didn't make the player feel 'Bond' enough. True, the thirdperson approach allows one to relate immediately to the on-screen heroics of the excellently rendered Pierce Brosnan avatar, but it also gives developers more design headaches. An intelligent auto-aim or lock-on function is vital, for instance, but the lock-on implemented here is indiscriminate and clumsy.

Meet three bad guys in a corridor and you want to instantly mow them down, yet shooting without the lock-on engaged is next to useless. Switch it on (by holding down the L1 button) and it's as likely to focus on the farthest enemy as it is the nearest. By the time you've cycled through to target the most potent threat, you could well be dead. There are wall-hug and crouch manoeuvres to help provide cover, but these often feel redundant during the more frenzied firefights.

The 'Bond moments' are more interesting. The idea here is that you get to feel just like the super-slick spy by performing daring feats, but these vignettes are anticlimactic to say the least (see 'Magic moments'). The driving sections are similarly mediocre, and while they may provide some variety and respite from the thirdperson sections, they are dogged by clockwork events and poor signposting. Having to race to checkpoints while constantly bringing up a GPS map (which is superimposed on the 'windscreen') is tormenting.

Some Q-built gadgets, including the spider-bomb and a remote-controlled buggy, as well as four varieties of multiplayer game, show just how much additional effort has gone into building *Everything Or Nothing* as a comprehensive package, but these extras are weaker than you'd find in countless other, better games. It's perhaps because the title benefits from such a high production spend, in fact, that the average design and execution becomes more pronounced.

Edge rating: Five out of ten











Bond's thermovision can be engaged in dark areas by pressing the select button. It would have been a novel touch two years ago







The animation, AI and ferocity of enemies is generally good, but once you've cleared an area guards can often re-emerge from locked doors. Targeting enemies in front, never mind behind, is clumsy

Magic moments

Pressing the left button on the D-pad triggers a bullet-time effect in which Bond can observe his surroundings and spot helpful objects to trigger Bond moments. However, these incidents tend to cause more problems than they solve. Throwing spanners at guards, shooting explosive barrels or turning on gas vents is hardly the stuff of legend and, more often than not, you get killed in the process of trying. Maybe that's the point (they're more daring), but too many feel clichéd and pointless.

Carve

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Take Two** Developer: **Argonaut** Price: **£20** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**124, **E**128















The ability to perform water tricks (the equivalent of *Tony Hawk's* flatland tricks) while staying on your craft becomes crucial in order to gain that vital advantage over the aggressive AI riders

Carve sounds like it ought to be some kind of hack'n'slash adventure, the word being more readily associated with swords, knives and turkey than it is with watersports and 'carving up the waves.' The game's battle for recognition isn't helped by the fact it can't call its vehicles 'Jet Skis' (trademarked by Kawasaki and licensed to *Jet Ski Riders*) or even 'Sea-doos' (trademarked by Bombardier and licensed to *Splashdown*), so it's settled for the horribly vague 'watercraft'.

Awkward nomenclature out of the way, *Carve* turns out to be one of the most immediate games we've played of late, and is just about the equal of genre champion *Wave Race: Blue Storm*. In fact, *Carve* bites on *Wave Race* considerably, lifting most of its control system and play structure. The game brings its own little additions – by copying the 'miss five buoys and you're out' system, it accentuates the tactical benefits of cutting corners as you learn where it's worth risking penalties and disqualification in order to save a few seconds.

Carve also improves on *Blue Storm*'s miserly eight-course repertoire by offering 27 satisfyingly varied circuits. Plentiful ramps provide opportunities for tricks and earning an essential speed 'rush,' although the automatic boost for high-scoring tricks sometimes works against you if a sharp turn is imminent.

Argonaut has stuck to traditional principles of how stunt-racing games should be structured, which makes for a balanced progression through the tournaments. On the other hand, there's no room for innovation. *SSX* showed how it should be done. With its race mode complemented by the ultimately more compelling trick challenges, EA's game abandoned realism, opting merely to maintain a satisfying feel while offering endless big air and multiple railslide combo opportunities. *Carve* is briefly thrilling, but complete the final tournament and you're left treading water.

Thankfully, the fourplayer splitscreen and eightplayer Xbox Live modes throw you a lifeline. The co-op teamplay doesn't really work, but frustrating opponents by forcing them to stall in your wake is effective.

Finally, if you're really into H_2O, the game features 'nice water effects'. Or, to be more specific, the dynamic waves affect what's sitting in them, while 'environment-mapped bump-mapping' adds an unusual level of sheen. Attention to detail like this makes for an attractive-looking game.

Edge rating: **Seven out of te**

Nightshade

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Sega WOW** Price: **£40** Release: **March 2004** Previously in **E133**

The best word to describe *Nightshade* is 'traditional', with 12 levels containing monsters to kill and scaffolding to negotiate, each culminating in a boss denouement. While 'traditional' need not be a dirty word, it's a shame that Sega also dredged up some design features that were perhaps best left in the Mega Drive era. It's not the boss battles – some of which can take upwards of 15 attempts to complete – that particularly infuriate, it's the instant deaths from falling that make *Nightshade* so uncompromising.

Play it on the default Normal setting and your reserves of patience will deplete as quickly as heroine Hibana's energy bar. Reach the unrelenting Tokyo highway section, and you'll be forgiven for wanting to give up (see 'Tokyo highway battle'). It's here that the flaws are most clearly exposed (though don't expect an easy ride on any of the preceding levels). You see, Hibana is an acrobatic lass, and along with the general leaping, ghost-dashing and wall-running she shares with *Shinobi*'s hero Hotsuma, she can lock on to enemies, hit them in mid air, then dash toward another foe or leap back to safety.

All good in theory, but the camera cannot hope to keep up with Hibana's clever acrobatics. Worse: missiles fired off-screen are often enough to put an end to her balletic mastery of the skies and cause her to plummet like a grouse full of lead shot. The emphasis on air-dashing across chasms becomes more pronounced as the game unfolds, and so does the irritation at having to play through long sections again.

Take the difficulty down a notch and things become a touch more enjoyable, allowing the game's finer points to shine through. The graceful combat combined with the cumulative 'Tate' system engenders the player with a real sense of empowerment, and altering your fighting strategy to suit individual opponents prevents everything getting too repetitive. And then there are those pesky bosses: again, they're traditional – you find the weakness, move in to deliver some damage, avoid a counter-attack and repeat. Each is idiosyncratic, however, and the preceding FMV is stylish enough to give you some payoff for your efforts.

An unforgiving experience, then, but *Nightshade* still has enough chutzpah to give those weaned on games without saves a stern and nostalgic challenge. Those afraid of tough bosses need not apply.

Edge rating: Six out of ten









The crustacean-style enemies are dumb and can be killed by ghosting around to their rear. More variety would have benefited the game



The air-dash is the game's most critical move, and is aided by a lock-on function. It's possible to travel long distances by attacking and killing a succession of winged enemies, but it's not easy



Tokyo highway battle

One of our least favourite levels in the game sees Hibana leaping from one vehicle to another along a Tokyo highway. These vehicles are bombarded with missiles, so it's not possible to stay on any one platform for very long. Air-dashing onto the side of articulated trucks looks cool, but one false move puts the heroine on the tarmac and back to the start of the level again. It's a bit like a frenzied version of *Frogger*, albeit one in which all the logs are on fire.

Otogi 2

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **From Software** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£35)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)**

Previously in **E**128











There are now six playable demon-killer characters instead of just one. They boost, pose and attack with an unmistakable sense of ground-shaking power. This is most definitely the way to do heroes





In some ways, *Otogi 2* is one of the most violent games ever made. The amount of sheer destruction that can be wreaked on each of the 27 stages is both breathtaking and satisfying



Win by the sword

Once again, magic, weapons and accessories can be bought or found, and there's now a Development option that offers attribute upgrades. There's a further addition in the form of bonus stages, where you can get equipment and bulk up your character's stats. Challenges include dashing through arches without touching the floor, as well as less delicate tasks such as killing 1,000 skeletons quickly.

Can a game look too pretty? In the same way that too much sugar can harm your teeth, it's possible that this sequel is so startlingly beautiful that it might just rot your eyes. Press a button to swing your weapon a the enemy and the heavens open, unleashing an apocalypse of lighting effects, dust and blur, accompanied by a cacophony of thuds, smashes and yelps of demonic pain.

In keeping with the original, *Otogi 2* is something of an empty vessel, but it's one of the most ornate and accomplished around, possibly the most excessively and obscenely beautiful videogame yet made. This is an unabashed bash 'em up, pure and simple and stunning, a game whose reward isn't subtlety or depth, but style, carnage and a haunting atmosphere. It's a remote-controlled light show of ungodly destruction with an intensity that's rarely seen. Anyone expecting play that goes beyond simple combat and combo-juggling acrobatics will be left cold, but everyone else can wallow in what must be one of the most narcotic, hypnotic and panoramic shallow ends available.

There isn't depth here, but there *is* substance, in that there's an overwhelming and visceral satisfaction to be gained from the dazzling display of on-screen pyrotechnics, accompanied by one of the most strikingly stark and unwavering audio/visual aesthetics yet implemented in a game.

Unlike the original, however, the game is now broken up into stages containing a handful of levels that can be tackled in any order. Each of the six available characters have their own RPG-style attributes, meaning that some offer more effective approaches to levels than others, as indicated by a report card at the start of each battle. Characters can only be used once per stage, so the choice is sometimes vital. Even if you stick with the best fit for each level, however, the ensuing chaos can make the game feel unfairly hard at times, as the enemies attack with a similar level of brutality to the protagonists, making *Otogi 2* a sometimes frustrating and overly demanding beat 'em up

That caveat again: this is nothing but a hitting-stuff simulator, where the combat is neither deep nor wide, just astonishingly, spectacularly violent and fizzy. Games that ar this electric and uniquely rewarding don't come along very often, whereas those with more complexity are commonplace. Take your pick.

Edge rating: Eight out of te

Sonic Heroes

Format: **Xbox (version tested), PS2, GC** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Sonic Team** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E125**

It's been several years since gamers moved on from the 16bit era, but Sega, it seems, is still struggling to find a comfy space for Sonic on today's generation of hardware. His defining characteristics – excessive speed and loop-the-loop abandon – still have no acceptable place in 3D platforming, and Sonic Team still seems hogtied by the idea of making a character move this fast in an environment that's more than just a racetrack.

So, *Sonic Heroes* brings with it the prospect of teamwork – letting the player control a trio of characters in an attempt to give them reason to slow down, dispense with the shark-like obsession of forever moving forwards, and think a little. Every team offers a speedy, flying and powerful character that can be switched to as and when you need to call on their particular strengths. A little bit of strategy, then.

To its credit the game opens auspiciously, and the multiple-choice pathways opened to you – clearly signposted as to which character can take you where – feel fresh enough to suggest that Sonic has finally cracked his 3D curse. With each subsequent level, though, that sensation flakes away as you realise that nothing really changes, whether between teams or levels, except for the risk of being flung to your death by a deadly mix of camera and momentum. The number of times you'll plummet into oblivion due to the confusing and jerky camerawork of up-close combat, or just through missing a platform you didn't even know existed, is excessive. Rarely does dying feel like the player's fault and, in typical *Sonic Adventure* fashion, the best bits are when you find that the majority of control has been taken away from you, and you're flung around the game world at escape velocity.

The puzzles aren't really puzzles, and the teamwork isn't really teamwork to any great extent, just a facility for the player to make an arbitrary choice that often sees them opting for the path of least resistance. Not even a little bit of strategy, then, really.

You really want to like *Sonic Heroes*, every new level bringing with it a flash of effervescent colour, towering skyscraper scale and a sachet of visual imagination. It's an uphill struggle, with every accidental death and workmanlike puzzle nibbling away another wedge of that enthusiasm, until you're left with a cluttered, stuttered and unmoving experience.

Edge rating: Five out of ten















Like so many of Sonic's adventures, the game opens in a lush tropical resort, ends with a stand-off atop Robotnik's mobilised fleet and takes a detour into a giant casino with Sonic as the ball for gigantic games of pinball and, enjoyably, bingo

Goblin Commander: Unleash The Horde

Format: **PS2 (version tested) Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Jaleco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E132**











Taking direct control of your troops gives the game its console feel, but is most useful for correcting mistakes in the AI's pathfinding

Realtime strategy has never been particularly realtime. Ahead of time perhaps, falling desperately behind time most definitely, but decisions are not made for the here and now, they are made for a glorious future where all are crushed before the might of your unstoppable war machine. *Goblin Commander* is an attempt to redress that paradox. An RTS made for consoles and only for consoles with every design decision started from those sticks, those triggers and that diamond of buttons, primed for a console audience. Not the quart in a pint pot of *Command & Conquer* conversions, but a whole experience built specifically for joypad botherers with concentration issues.

Given that, the first thing that strikes you is the visual styling of the game. Goblins are as far from being console-demographic-friendly as is emotionally possible. Nobody, nobody at all, ever walks into a game shop and thinks: "Hey, goblins are pretty cool. Today I want to be a goblin." When the goblins in question have been rendered with almost no character or charm, this merely compounds the lack of emotional connection.

Putting aesthetics aside and rolling up the gaming sleeves quickly allows the player to appreciate just how seriously Jaleco has taken console integration. Units are grouped together by clan, of which there may be up to three under the player's control at any time. Directing these clans to perform any of the available actions is achieved with a single button press. Menus are simplified to be used with a quick rotation of the analogue stick, and navigating the map is as quick and easy as could be asked.

Success there, then, but there is little else of note. Attempts to introduce console-style pacing, with resources gathered either from destroying the environment or from battle itself, are flimsy departures from conventional mechanics and make no change from the slow hoarding expected. Skirmish mode is only available in twoplayer, and without the AI's forced stupidity these become little more than wars of attrition.

What has been achieved here is an effective distillation of the unwieldy controls of an RTS. What has not been achieved is either an intelligent refinement of the rules behind those controls or the injection of any character that might sell the RTS to those who wouldn't consider the genre in its more complex form.

Edge rating: Five out of ten





Aside from troops and Titans, the only other building options are towers that will offer a degree of automated defence for your base. These become essential later in the game as the odds stack up against your goblin band



Toytanic

Each clan can build a single Titan, a behemoth fighting machine under the direct control of the player. These are the most inventive creatures in the game, with the Warpigpult being the standout moment. Here, control of the creature's catapult is mapped directly to the right analogue stick with a swift flick sending rocks hurtling towards your enemies. Most satisfying.

Kya: Dark Lineage

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **Eden Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

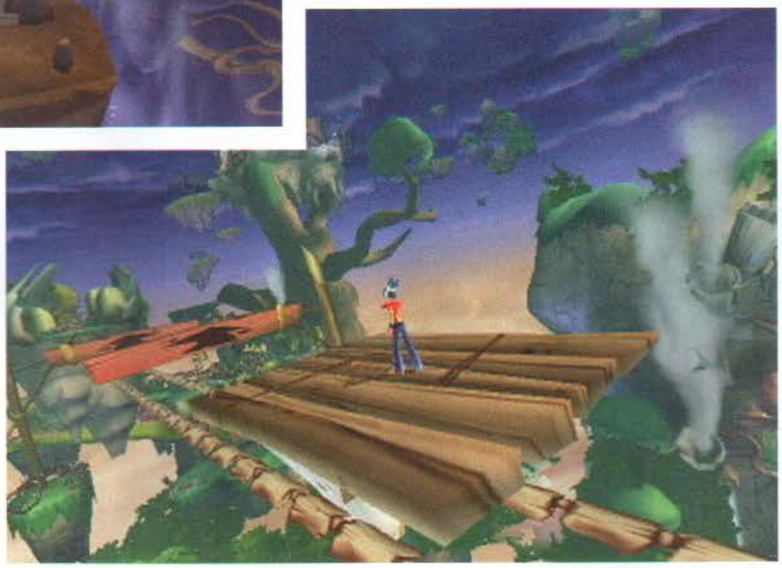
Previously in **E**124, **E**129







There are several mini-game huts dotted around, which let you play against friends or gamble your money. It's never worth your bother, though, since they're dreadfully dull









Kya can't fly as such, but drops from a great height let her glide and swoop. You'll need to find a soft landing spot, however, or you'll die



Sons and daughters

Kya, the game's elegant, acrobatic heroine, is sucked into a mysterious world via an even more mysterious portal opened by her half-brother as he meddles with artifacts left by her especially mysterious father. It's a traditional fantasy yarn with a modern social twist, as Kya's hostility to her father and curiosity about, and resentment of, her half-sibling get mixed up in a traditional battle of cute and fluffy versus dark and gnarly.

The things that are wrong with *Kya* are not what you'd expect. As a representative of that most dreaded of genres, the hybrid platform game, it houses all sorts of likely candidates for gaming frustration. There are pseudo-snowboarding courses, galloping bipeds to ride, dozens of fight combos to learn and some extended flying sections. It's a rich enough recipe to give any game a stomach ache, but *Kya* handles them all with confidence. Your magic board lets you slice down half-pipes with exhilarating ease, while the combat is a little random but packed with *Prince Of Persia* fluidity, and the gliding provides as much freedom to soar as you could hope for in a game of this nature.

Instead, what blights *Kya* is a plague of basic frustrations as the controls become increasingly fiddly and unreliable. *Kya* is not a difficult game, but every time you fail you will be cursing the controls and not yourself. 'Press Square to climb', the game instructs cheerily, when what it means is 'Press Square to trigger the climbing animation for a few frames and then fall to your death.' Although it seems that even dying is botched, as falling from too great a height will reset your position without any visual or aural cues to tell you what's just happened.

Structurally, the game is a waking nightmare. The hub world is vast and unnecessarily confusing, and it is possible to become trapped in levels if you can't figure out where to go next. Progress is governed by rescuing Nativs so they can return to the hub and sell you essential power-ups. Irritatingly, you're not always given a clear pointer about when to return and invest in your next ability, and once you've returned you may find yourself without enough money to buy it. And if, at any point, you manage to free yourself from this tangle, you'll discover that you haven't freed enough of the Nativs to buy some essential piece of kit, forcing you to backtrack whether you want to or not.

What's demoralising is how much there is in the game that is good. Visually, there's a richness to the world which has rarely been seen since the move to 3D – the lush vegetation of the forests is reminiscent of the vibrant splendour of *Rayman*. And the sense of scale, as Kya dives through the sky from one vast island to another, is often enough to make you catch your breath. It's nowhere near enough, however, to redeem her fundamental flaws.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

Mafia

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **Take Two** Developer: **Illusion Softworks** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E115**

It's easy to see why Take Two chose to bring *Mafia* from the PC to a console audience. On the face of it, the game is massively reminiscent of *Grand Theft Auto III*, and if there's anything today's console owners will buy, it's a *GTA*-alike – hence Activision's *True Crime* still performing in the charts despite it managing to offer only a portion of what Rockstar's game infamously delivers.

Rather than attempting to significantly tweak *Mafia*'s structure and narrative to make it more comfortably at home on PS2, the developer has attempted to replicate the PC experience to the letter. It has been only partially successful.

The beautiful cut-scenes, with their incredible attention to detail, are all present and correct, but the city itself can be a messy place, marred by pop-up and other issues. Just as well that most of the time the game hardly needs to make them fly by, because of the slow nature of its vehicles.

The chief problem, however, lies in control during combat: aiming with a stick pales in comparison to using a mouse. A frustrating port of an above-average game, then.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









Control problems make themselves known when the game begins to get a little tough, kicking off with the hotel mission (far left) in which you must assassinate a target, retrieve important documents, then set the place to blow. Though there is room to drive with some abandon (above), the physics system isn't as complex as *GTAIII*'s. This makes for a less dramatic driving experience

Whiplash

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Eidos** Developer: **Crystal Dynamics** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**





Despite the simplicity of the puzzles, it's an unnecessarily bewildering game for the first hour or so. There's an RPG's worth of menus, full of abilities and stats you just don't need to know about yet





It's certainly one of the freshest spins on the hero/sidekick platforming duo: a weasel with sparking electrodes dangling from his temple, and a wild-eyed bunny fresh from the chemical abuse of the testing labs. *Whiplash* also does a neat line in anti-corporate satire and self-referencing humour that mostly works. There's also a successful take on the high-score meter: the number at the bottom of the screen records the monetary value of the cruel corporation you're trying to escape from, and the more havoc wreaked in your bid for freedom, the more money dribbles out of their account.

Welcome spins, sure, but they're just not enough to salvage *Whiplash* from that infection of blandness which most 3D platformers find it hard to transcend. *Whiplash* has no glaring flaws that prevent you from getting into and across it, except for that humdrum sensation that comes with having to jump-hit-collect-repeat from room to room.

It's still a peculiar pleasure to leave a scientist at the mercy of angry monkeys, but once all is wittily said and done it's still an anodyne experience, albeit one dressed up like an individual.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

Romance Of The Three Kingdoms VIII

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Koei** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£30** Release: **March 26**





The game's structure expects you to hit the ground running. Which is fair enough – it *is* the eighth instalment, after all. In all likelihood this will be the first chapter experienced by European gamers, and consequently a bewildering experience. Family ties, friendships and rivalries, for example, all add an extra dimension to the game, but the sheer number of Chinese names can become confusing





The problem with *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms VIII* is that it will be utterly impenetrable to anyone who hasn't played one of the previous titles in the series. The scope of the game is simply bewilderingly large and almost disconcertingly open-ended. It is possible to play through various historical scenarios that impose more clear-cut objectives beyond simply running a kingdom but, ultimately, the game's goals are whatever you choose. The muddle of menus and maps, however, do little to convey what's going on.

Up to eight characters can be played, drawn from different ranks in the ruling hierarchy. Each rank has its own responsibilities and limitations, so rulers look after top-level strategy, while their vassals take care of the day-to-day running of cities, for example. Given that Koei's 'tutorial' is actually just an online manual, the best way of learning the ropes is to play through these different ranks. Only the most ardent grognard will do more than dent the surface of this enormous strategy game, which rather diminishes the overall impact for the rest of us.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Bujingai

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Taito** Developer: **Red Storm** Price: **¥6,800 (£36)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)**

Despite the deceptive dullness of *Bujingai's* environments, it's still business as usual for anyone who's played Red Entertainment's previous title, *Gungrave*. It's all about flamboyance, stylish swordplay against clusters of spawning enemies, rather than hacking away at a difficulty curve.

Brilliantly named lead character Gackt (modelled on a Japanese pop star) is equipped with a 'Just' meter, effectively a series of parry chances that allow you to block and counter with your own flurry of swipes. As the game progresses, more and more enemies have their own 'Just' meters, and this leads to some epic duels. While these can be reduced to a glorious button-bash, the ratio of pyrotechnics to button presses is satisfyingly high.

For a game with a flashdance of lavish-looking combat as its hallmark, the levels seem barely populated and overlong by half. And while Gackt's nimbleness is pretty much unprecedented, he's hard to guide around with any amount of accuracy. Anyone expecting more than the chance to concoct dazzling high-score strategies will find it a flat and empty experience, though.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten









The potential for combos is facilitated by the generous period of time between hits. It's easier to link huge chains of attack than in, say, *Otogi 2*, but the dearth of enemies makes it feel less intense than From Software's own momentous slasher

Hyper Street Fighter II Anniversary Edition

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£36)** Release: **Out now (Japan)** Previously in **E**133

Playing *Street Fighter II* – *any* version of *Street Fighter II* – on a PlayStation2 DualShock controller just isn't quite right, as its D-pad doesn't rock in the way old the SNES joypad's would. It's bearable, but to get the most out of this celebratory package you'll want to be using an arcade stick.

Then it's properly down to business, and a colourful trip down memory lane reverberating with the legendary sounds of Hundred Hand Slaps and jingles that accompanied a million grudge matches.

This is as polished a collection as a *Street Fighter II* fan could wish for, with no straining loading times to break up the action and a comprehensive frontend – although, curiously, there is no option to redefine controls mid-game.

In terms of gameplay value, we've been here approximately a million times before, but never have we been able to experiment by throwing original-era Ken against his *Super*-powered iteration and so on, and this element will provide hours' worth of challenges between hardened *Street Fighter II* nuts.

The core concept may be old, but it's still big and it's most definitely clever.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









One of the most enduring gameplay concepts from the early '90s, *Street Fighter II* still holds up today, mostly in terms of twoplayer bouts. During breaks from combat you can sit back and enjoy the 'Street Fighter' anime DVD also included in the package

Puyo Pop Fever

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£20** Release: **Out now**







Puyos fall from the top of each screen, and must be arranged to form groups of the same colour. Four or more go pop, but the trick is to organise sequences, or 'chains', that will cascade for bonuses



It is one of the most edible games of all time. The blobs fall, stick to each other, and then pop with such sweet aplomb it's difficult to not imagine how they taste. Sugary, probably. Irrelevant? Well, not really. *Puyo Puyo*'s problem is the same as *Tetris*, *Bust-A-Move*, and any other simple puzzle game. Once the idea's been realised, how can you keep persuading people to buy it over and over again? Just as importantly, how can you update a game for a modern system when it sat perfectly comfortably on a console a few generations ago?

The answer to both queries is in making the aesthetics as pleasing as possible. *Puyo Pop Fever* does that well, using a 3D engine to produce satisfying spin effects every time you score a chain. The only real gameplay alteration is with the Fever mode, which generates screen after screen of preset chains to unleash. It's a fine addition, a neat new toy, but hardly revolutionary. Sega might have better spent its time maintaining the fourplayer mode present in *Puyo Puyo 4*. Still, even if it had, *Fever* would still be just an excellent version of a game people should really own already.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Night Trap

Edge takes a fresh look at a key release from yesteryear

Format: **Mega CD** Publisher: **Sega Of America** Developer: **Digital Pictures** Release: **1992**





The onset of the mission is preceded by a briefing addressed directly at the player. This approach forges a promising prelude to a game that fails to deliver

Technically speaking, *Night Trap* is the videogame equivalent of the breakthrough to moving pictures from still photography. However, the error of comparing Digital Pictures to the Lumiere brothers soon becomes apparent.

The premise is simple – take control of a series of cameras installed in a remote house and use traps to prevent marauding vampire/alien hybrids harming the stereotypical occupants – scantily-clad young females. Hackneyed drivel or postmodern irony? You have to favour the former – see the box art for proof.

Control is fairly simple, allowing the player to monitor activity in various rooms via different cameras. These are selectable, and permit the game's different activities to unfold over a number of sittings. Clues to the mystery of the invading forces are strewn about, and the choices of which room to observe and when form a loose schedule depicting likely attacks.

Unfortunately, in terms of neutralising attackers, the success rate needs to be 100 per cent – arrive late on the scene, or be looking elsewhere, and a repeat attempt is necessary. Within a short hour, this approach becomes intolerably tedious, watching the same footage over and over a chore rather than a pleasure, and given the prerendered nature of the proceedings, the chance of variation is zero. Suddenly, the game's need to manacle the player to its timeline becomes all too apparent.

In fairness, the leap from 2D bitmaps in 64 colours to full-motion video (FMV) with Red Book-standard audio initially excites, particularly when in-game characters address the viewer. The experience is unlike anything else, both thrilling and absorbing, but it doesn't last. The acting is laboured, costumes are unimaginative and, most important of all, the gameplay descends into the most banal mix of memory-test and guesswork. *Night Trap* is an overblown husk, barely deserving of the label 'entertainment', never mind 'videogame'.

The allure of the 'interactive movie' is proving too much to resist for some, and *Night Trap* is not the only game pushing the FMV genre. But it could well be the worst.

Edge rating: Three out of ten







The actors employed as characters are little more than unknowns, bar the inclusion of Dana Plato of 'Diff'rent Strokes' fame. Oxymoronic, perhaps, but it's not the acting that will appeal to some gamers





Retrospective

With the likes of *Sewer Shark*, *Double Switch* and *Ground Zero Texas* entering the Mega CD catalogue, it's fair to say that the 'interactive movie' was the product of a naive approach to new hardware. Numerous titles have surfaced over the years, including the most (in)famous exponent, *Dragon's Lair*, but none has come remotely close to offering decent thrills, partly due to the efforts required to render the illusion of freedom, but also because of their lazy scripting and poor acting.


Budweis



The making of…

Tapper

Looking for a game to play in a bar, two coders hit upon an apt concept: beer. A legend was born…

Not all gamers are teenagers. Nor do they always hang out in arcades. Such was the thinking of Bally Midway, which in the early '80s decided to sidestep its competition by building games for the untapped market of less competitive 'street' locations – any site that wasn't an arcade, such as a pizza joint or a bar.

Tommy Nieman was Bally Midway's crown prince of licensing. He loved doing it, and had brokered many deals for the company's line of pinball machines (his most successful was with the rock band Kiss for *Kiss Pinball*). With Bally Midway setting its sights on developing a videogame for the bar scene, he thought who better to go

Original format: **Arcade**
Publisher: **Bally Midway**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **US**
Original release date: **1983**

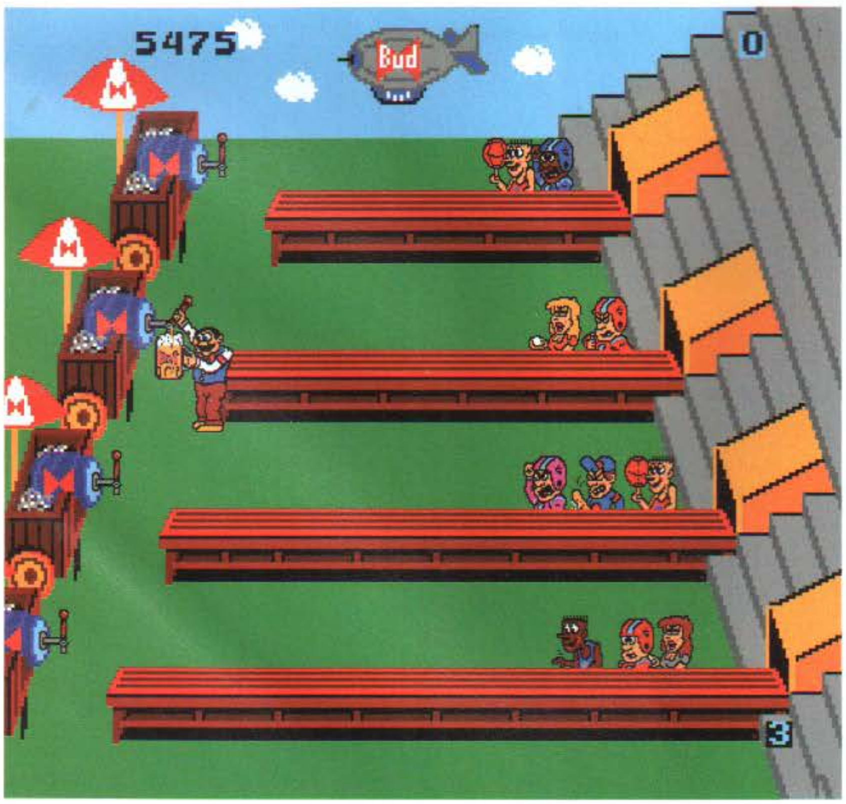


Cocktail versions of *Tapper* are rare, only ever reaching the UK via specialist import. It's a cabinet for the true collector, then

after than Budweiser, the 'King of Beers'? Nieman landed the contract and the pump was primed for success. Bally Midway had a competition-free arena and the king of all licensing deals. Now the only thing left to do was to create a fun game.

Toy think tank

In the early '80s, Marvin Glass and Associates, a toy development think-tank, began pitching videogame ideas to Bally Midway. At the time, the manufacturer didn't have the full-blown videogame development capabilities to simply accept ideas – it needed finished games. Most of Bally Midway's energies were being spent re-releasing games imported from Japan. If Marvin Glass wanted to get into the videogame business, the company would have to develop the games itself. With a 'let's give it a go' attitude, the toy developer looked within the family for technical talent. Two of the firm's partners called their sons, **Steve Meyer** and **Scott Morrison**, to begin a videogame development division of the company. The two collaborated as programmer and artist, respectively. Four years in the videogame business, the company ended up creating six games for Bally Midway. *Tapper*, the company's third game, was developed for a very specific audience: beer monsters.



Tapper's gameplay begins at a sedate pace, but soon becomes frantic. Prioritising your barkeeping duties is the cornerstone of success, flinging fresh flagons towards approaching customers while watching out for empties

Only here for the beers

Knowing only that the game would appear in a bar, the idea for *Tapper* began with a simple suggestion from Meyer: "How about a bar game where you're sliding beers back and forth?" At first, he had no idea what it would look like. Thinking of images he had seen in countless westerns, he said to Morrison: "It would be fun if we had a guy that was actually filling beers and throwing them. Why don't we start there? Go make a bartender and make a beer mug and a bar and let's see what happens."

And this was essentially the basis of Meyer and Morrison's working relationship – the two sat next to each other collaborating on ideas. When they hit upon an idea they liked, Morrison would draw it. Meyer would program the gameplay and together they prayed it would be fun. "My belief about developing videogames back then was that you started with a couple of elements that were fun on the screen and you grew it from there," says Meyer.

Over time, all the elements did fall into place. First, the bar patrons inched their way down the bar, towards the bartender, demanding service. Once served, the force of the sliding beer knocked a patron back a notch. This appeasement only lasted for a moment, and demands on the bartender's time increased. A finished drink produced both an empty glass, that was pushed back towards the bartender, but also an irate drunk demanding more beer. The player had to catch these returned glasses while still serving beers. An empty glass that reached the end of the bar would break, and a drunk who reached the



Suntory, a brand of beer from the east, replaced Budweiser in Japanese cabs

end of the bar became fed up and would slide the bartender back down the bar, smashing all the empty glasses in his path. Both situations resulted in the loss of a life.

After all these elements were in place, Morrison and Meyer knew they had something fun, but it still wasn't challenging. It wasn't a game. *Tapper* only had one bar – it needed another one. By adding that second bar, the 'something fun' turned into a 'game.' "You've got a bartender having to decide which bar to be at," says Meyer. When one patron is drinking, do you have time to jump down to the other bar to pick up glasses and serve the other patrons? Over time, those two bars grew into four and *Tapper*'s gameplay was complete. The next step was to add colour.

Patrons

A lover of cartoons, Morrison created expressive characters with personality and definition. He used a live model, co-worker Mike Ferris, as *Tapper*'s bartender. Morrison describes Ferris as a big jolly guy with a giant moustache who always wore a red T-shirt. If playing *Tapper* brings a sense of videogame déjà vu, it's probably because you've also played *Domino Man*, where the Ferris bartender character made his initial appearance.

To help Morrison create the characters he needed, programmer Elaine Hodgson improved upon the art tool available. "[It] was an Atari joystick mounted on top of a *Gorf* handle with a series of phone buttons on top of the handle," explains Morrison. He

used the joystick brush to create the background and characters for *Tapper*'s four themed bars – western, sports, punk and alien. He left a little bit of himself in the punk bar, by introducing a patron with a safety pin through his head. Safety pins have always been of interest to Morrison, but he wears one on his belt today, rather than in his head.

Too many legs

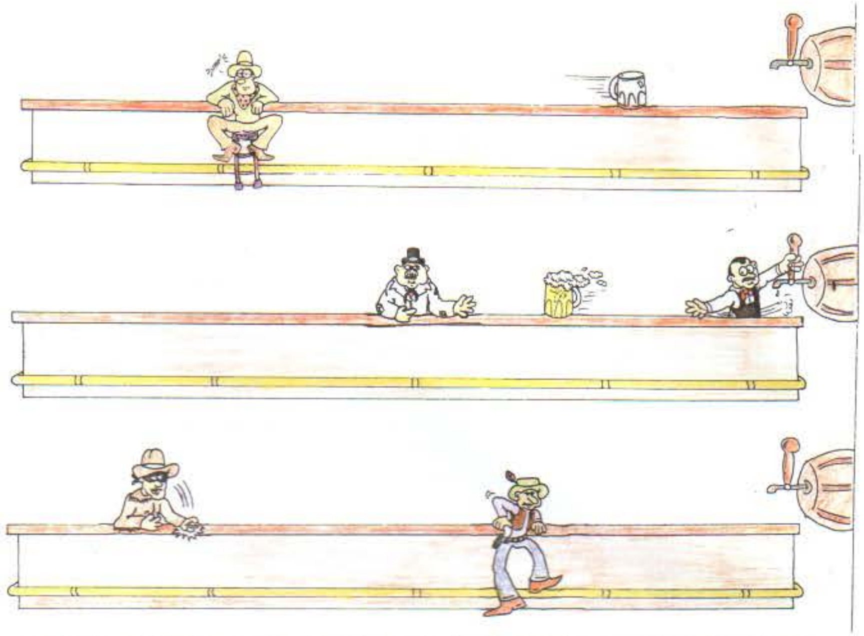
One of the biggest challenges with *Tapper* was to work around the restrictions of the NCR sprite manipulation format. This system had limits on how many could be moved on the screen simultaneously. "You had to be very clever about utilising your memory and your space to make it look like the screen was very active," says Morrison.

Two sprites were needed to create a full-body character; a half-body character obviously used just one. With *Tapper*'s first design, the bartender was behind the bar and the patrons were in front. This configuration required Morrison to animate lots and lots of legs. That was simply too many sprites. By moving the patrons behind the bar and the barman in front, the ratio of full bodies to half bodies was reversed, lowering the sprite count by some margin.

he explains. "If you were able, while in that window, to work very hard and get all the customers out the door, then they wouldn't come back in as quickly and you could win the game. However, if you weren't able to take advantage of that window the game would begin getting progressively more difficult again."

Non-stop belching

Sometimes good ideas turn bad when you actually hear them. Such was the case with the burps in *Tapper*. Wanting to take advantage of a brand-new digitising chip from Texas Instruments, Meyer and Morrison thought it would be a good idea to add a burp every time a character finished a drink. So, to create the source audio, a group from the *Tapper* team went into a conference room with a bunch of soft drinks, beers and microphones, and just started burping. Looking back on the misguided notion, Morrison says: "We put it in, and it was disgusting." The game was so fast and the drinks were being finished so quickly that you heard constant belching. In the end, the duo didn't bother installing the burps or the TI chip, although Morrison admits that passing by their office during that phase of development was a treat for all within earshot.



This *Tapper* concept art shows the original bar configuration, with some customers in front and the barman behind. This plan was eventually dropped because of the difficulty in animating the required amount of sprites

"My belief about developing videogames back then was that you started with a couple of elements that were fun on the screen and you grew it from there"

The difficulty with difficulty

But *Tapper*'s difficulty curve wasn't working because it was too linear. The game progressed until it reached a point where it became impossible to play. Bar tests at The Snuggery in Chicago showed players getting aggravated. Responding to frustrations, Meyer made the game easier... but only for a moment. "Once you were working there would be a window that would all of a sudden get a little bit easier. And you would have to recognise when that window was,"

We love drinking games

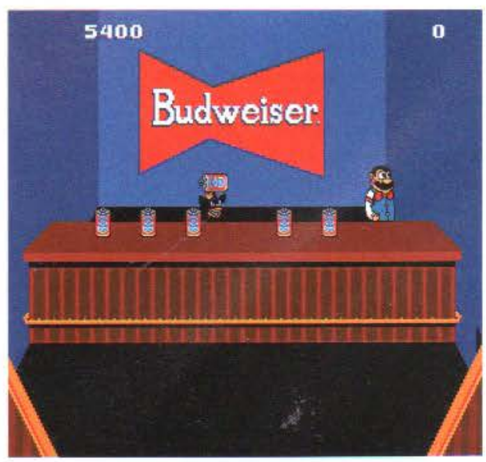
While manufacturers often shunned excessive cabinet design due to the high production costs involved, Bally Midway went all out for *Tapper* with brass-coloured foot rails and cup holders, and thanks to Nieman's licensing deal, Budweiser got in-game graphics as well as a billboard on the beer tap's handle controller.

With 3,300 units of *Tapper* manufactured, the game's success began to move from 'the street' and into arcades. This wasn't the exposure Bally Midway wanted, as advertising alcohol to minors was, and still is, illegal. Sorry, Budweiser, Bally Midway needed a family-friendly version, and quick. In less than two weeks, Meyer and Morrison developed graphics for a new version: *Root Beer Tapper*.

Today, Morrison is the vice president of marketing for Incredible Technologies, producer of *Golden Tee Golf*, one of the most successful videogames found in pubs. He stopped programming games when the field went 3D, and admits: "The 3D stuff started to blow my mind."

Meyer went on to create more videogames, and then left to start his own toy development company, Meyer Glass. He misses the days of two-man collaboration: "You can have a vision for a game and, like we did with *Tapper*, you can really begin with something that you think is fun and play with it."

Today, a £30m PlayStation2 game requires high-level engineering planning. As a result, the fun elements of collaboration get thrown on the back burner. This is a mistake, believes Meyer, who stands by the adage that "the breakthroughs in gaming come from that kind of development."



Tapper's bonus game involved watching a row of beers being shaken, the objective being to pick the single unmolested can

RESET

Where yesterday's gaming goes to have a lie down

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 69, March 1999

From here on in things get dangerous. Issue 69 saw the start of 'Edge View': a "look at yesteryear's headlines: five years ago this month". The birth of Reset! Which means if **Edge** isn't careful, it could find itself doing Reset on Reset, and the world might implode in an orgy of smug, tongue-in-cheek commentary.

Steering its coruscating wit away from the back end of the magazine, then, the ever-stronger **Edge** focused its attentions on *Giants*, the much-anticipated (and ultimately underrated) FPS/RTS hybrid. It looked as gloriously abstract then as it would do on release, and a tie-in feature called 'Reality Bytes' (*very* clever) examined the creative cul-de-sac of emulating reality. Beginning with a TS Eliot quote, the piece asked if a game like *Trespasser*'s failings stemmed from trying to be too close to real life, and concluded "perhaps *Galleon* gets it right with its stylised look". Perhaps...

The best speculation in the magazine, though, was reserved for the news section, and Sony's soon-to-be-announced PlayStation sequel. On top of the editorial intro, and taking up much of page 7, was an "artist's impression of the new architecture". In terms of impressions it was less 'Spitting Image' and more Les Dennis – the square render was a garish orange and silver, and looked kind of like a Dreamcast with PlayStation ports stuck to the front. "It's the best kept secret in the industry at the moment," **Edge** was told. "Everyone's disclaiming any knowledge of anything. The only thing I'd say is that it's fucking cool." Well, orange and silver *is* cool, isn't it? Anyone?

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
"This latest version of the *Zero* series might be the most progressive, advanced and, on occasion, innovative *Street Fighter* game for an age, but nevertheless this *Zero 3* is, ultimately, just another reiteration of an ageing blueprint." **Edge**'s opening assessment of the excellent *Street Fighter Zero 3*. The score? 8/10

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"They probably know what they're after as much as I do. And I haven't got a fucking clue." Gary Penn answers **Edge**'s question on whether gameplayers really know what they want to play

TESTSCREENS AND RATINGS:
Sega Rally 2 (DC; 8/10), *Rollcage* (PS; 7/10), *Mario Party* (N64; 7/10), *All-star Dai Rantou Smash Brothers* (N64; 5/10), *Alpha Centauri* (PC; 9/10), *SimCity 3000* (PC; 7/10), *Delta Force* (PC; 7/10), *Street Fighter Zero 3* (PS; 8/10), *Superbike World Championships* (PC; 7/10)



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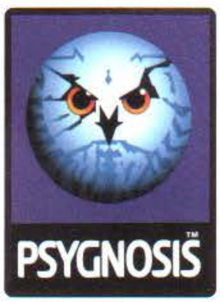
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1. *Giants* – lucid, beautiful and destined to sell about six copies 2. **Edge**'s first look at Rebellion's excellent *Aliens vs Predator* 3. The shy and retiring Gary Penn 4. The shy and retiring 'Daily Mail' 5. UltraHLE makes N64 emulation a reality, and **Edge** isn't quite sure what to think 6. The magazine does its misty-eyed retrospective thing with the Amiga 7. Psygnosis coughs, chokes, and signs itself over to Sony 8. The first ever Reset. Careful, kids, herein is a portal to ten years ago... 9. *Um Jammer Lammy*: "Whatever they're taking at SCEI it must be expensive and illegal" 10. The PS2 in March 1999. Maybe.

inbox

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Regarding the feature in **E**132 about massmarket games, where you touched upon Japanese games' reduced market share in Europe: one explanation could be the arrival of Xbox, with its inevitable emphasis on games developed in the west. Another explanation could be the massive anime boom in Japan, coinciding with stagnation in the games industry. This means more resources are used to develop game tie-ins with current animes (this works the other way too, with games being turned into animes, such as *Sonic*). I'm uncertain about the quality of these anime-related games, but they seem to be dominating the charts in Japan. Since Japanese anime is still rather underground in Europe (there are signs that this is about to change, though), very few of these games will ever be released here. The few games of this type that have been released in Europe have suffered from poor translations and normally only feature American dubs, and so they are ignored by anime enthusiasts. A third explanation could simply be that western developers have become more skilled at making games, with production values on a level similar to the Japanese.
Svenn Ramlo

What's certainly interesting, though, is that Japanese developers are now striving to make more games suited to western tastes. Expect these plans to bear fruit soon.

I read with interest the articles on the new drive towards pushing games into the mainstream (**E**132). Much as I applaud the likes of EyeToy for making games as entertainment more approachable to new players, it's not enough to really capture the imagination of a mainstream audience. Why? Because it's still only entertainment, and nothing more.

There are several things which separate the world of games from the more socially accepted forms of entertainment and (dare we say the word?) art, such as music, literature, TV, cinema and painting. By far the most important, in my opinion, is that games are an interactive, immersive experience, something conveniently forgotten when publishers boast about their new game's 'cinematic qualities' (that means more cut scenes and less gameplay to you and me), and painfully dragged up again when critics remind us how fragging bots in a deathmatch is more likely to cause kids to gun their schoolmates down than, say, a violent movie or Marilyn Manson.

An interesting example of a game that thrived on this controversy, yet came close to showing us the way forward, is *GTA: Vice City*. The *GTA* series has always deliberately sold itself on its strong themes of violence, drugs and prostitution (not unsuccessfully, I might add). Yet it seems its creators shot themselves, and the industry, in the foot with this strategy when the media fell over itself to criticise its nomination for a UK Design Award. The result was that a breakthrough for the games industry was hampered by the fact they had to censor the product to be nominated. All references to violence and criminal activity were removed from the version exhibited. In other words, they had to remove everything that made the game fun. But the sandbox design for which they got the design credit in the first place seemed to me to be the first baby steps towards games as a medium finally being able to express themselves in a concrete and meaningful way.

Science fiction had a hard time coming of age, but few would now deny that the likes of George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' had a profound impact on the world's consciousness. Good sci-fi writers can create a new, fictional universe and then explore the concepts and ideals of that world to reflect upon our own world, our own morals and ideals. Games not only allow us to see that universe but to become a part of it, to form our own views on it rather than being force fed opinions, however subtly, by the authors. We can give the players the chance to live in that world, to become the protagonist, to shape the outcome of the story and learn that there are consequences to their actions. There's no reason why games can't entertain and inspire people at the same time – the two qualities go hand in hand.

It's time for the games industry itself to accept responsibility for growing up and using this unique medium to really say something. What happens when game designers finally find their voice? What happens when we finally stop the debate over Lara Croft's bra size and come up with a female protagonist that reflects a realistic portrayal of women? When violence has a reason, a justification in the game world, rather than being a cheap cathartic thrill? Is society ready to handle the runaway global commercial success of something like *Pokémon* coupled with the social insight of something like 'Brave New World'? The sooner developers and publishers wake up to the possibilities, the sooner we can all feel proud of this medium we love so much, and the sooner we can dare utter words such as 'mainstream'.
Alex O'Brian

After reading your article about *Manhunt* (**E**133) I went back to last month's review and re-read it, and also found the Lion and Lamb website article. Surely, of all the videos and films that are made each year, we are aware that they aren't all made as 'fun for all the family to enjoy' – their certification gives clear guidance as to who they are suitable for.

Why, apparently, should that not be the case for videogames which also have clear certification? The argument against violent content in games because children have access to them just doesn't wash when all sorts of undesirable content is available on TV and video. Many more children have access to these media than would have access to games costing up to £40 (of which many are also rated as 15+ or 18+ anyway). If you watch any soap opera there's more than enough foul language and violence to go around, and that is considered acceptable for early evening family viewing. I'm sure that I don't want my choice of games censored because parents and shop assistants cannot observe the

"What happens when game designers finally find their voice? What happens when we finally stop the debate over Lara Croft and come up with a more realistic portrayal of women?"



Marcus Wright believes that the success of *Rising Sun* is down to many gamers' narrowed experience

clear age restrictions on the products they sell!
Jamie Simmons

Out of all this, one thing is for sure: it won't be long before the sale of age-restricted games becomes more strictly controlled.

You might be interested in my wife's experiences as a primary school teacher of years four, five and six (ages eight to 11) at a fairly average suburban school.

My wife, who is herself a videogame player of many years (she still has an Atari 2600 from her childhood), has found over the last couple of years that *Grand Theft Auto* titles are the most talked about and aspired to games amongst her pupils.

At least a third of boys are playing these games, some properly and others just to mess around within the game world. A year four boy brought a copy of *GTA* to school to lend to another, and in year five a copy of *GTA* was traded for another game between pupils in her class.

Going back further in my wife's teaching experiences, to a Church of England primary school, she remembers several boys in a mixed year-one-and-two class (ages five to seven) who played the original PS *Resident Evil* game.
Bluey

I have often been confused by, and compelled to find out, why it is those gamers often referred to as 'casual' still purchase and make successes of substandard videogames.

Like most readers of **Edge**, I am aware that big-name licences play a large part in this, but given the games and systems most casual gamers have played (particularly since the launch of the original PlayStation), surely by now they must have some concept of the difference between mediocre and astounding in relation to games. Media hype and dishonest reviews (inspired by the lure of either personal gain or the big 'exclusive') play some part, but it was only recently I felt I had discovered the answer to this disappointing and constant trend.

While visiting a 'friend of a friend' who owned a GameCube, we started to talk generally about videogames. "Have you played *Medal Of Honor: Rising Sun* yet?" I was asked. He went on: "It's awesome, absolutely great, can I show you?"

Not wishing to dampen his enthusiasm for a title I had no interest in, I reluctantly agreed and he put it on. I was literally lost for words. This game, which topped the sales charts over Christmas, was unbelievably dull. The graphics were uninspiring and flat, the levels inexcusably linear and the gameplay a tired rehash from superior titles long ago. And yet, there he sat, relishing every minute of it. Why couldn't he see how mediocre it was?

It was then it hit me: he hadn't played anything better. Blinded by hype, advertising and, more often than not, a media without a conscience, he had never 'strayed' to play titles such as *Halo* and other genre classics. From his point of view they were no better and they had no licence or brand attached to them, so why bother?

I realised then that it doesn't really matter how many videogames you have played, it's *what* you have played that counts. If you have never played anything better than *Rising Sun* then it stands to reason it's the best FPS ever made! So-called 'hardcore' gamers often moan about an industry that has lost its way and its flair for originality, but are we in fact to blame? Perhaps it is up to us, the more 'enlightened', to stop taking the back seat and start showing others just how good gaming can be. The next time I visit this new friend, an Xbox and copy of *Halo* will accompany me.

Take the back seat, keep the gems to yourself and we risk losing the future classics to licensed mediocre tat. Enlighten those who count, the masses, and maybe then we can dispel our share of the blame, and maybe then our voices will be heard.
Marcus Wright

That sounds like a call to arms. And why not? A little gentle guidance for gamers who haven't played the likes of *Halo* can't hurt.

I was pleased to see a mini-feature in **Edge** last month looking at the issue of Amazon reviews. It's on the button up until "written for love, not money". The first reviews for each item on Amazon.co.uk are entered into a prize draw every month or so which can net a £50 gift certificate. Considering the sheer number of items added each month, it's no surprise that most of my attempts at timely, well-written prose on games are beaten to the button by some nonsensical future-tense spew written long before the game's release. In spite of prompting, Amazon don't seem especially eager to screen reviews more closely than checking for swearing or defamation, which is a shame, as it means that the first half-dozen or so reviews for any product are utterly devoid of worth, and written for money, not love.
Alex W

Jeez, Edge, up the print run, guys – things are getting way out of hand. I am of course referring to the new UK hot commodity, **Edge** back issues.

Being an avid reader from issue one to date, I like to think I have a complete and uninterrupted run of issues, but I hit a snag at issue 128. At the time I couldn't justify spending £40 on all ten covers, so I only bought two, and now find myself in a very expensive bidding war on eBay if I wish to get them all. Some of the covers are changing hands for £15 each, and even run-of-the-mill issues for more than a fiver.

Is it time for **Edge** to print more, to supply the obvious demand, or will more copies then fall into the hands of the 'touts'?

Issue 128 does come up, but it's always a bloke in Bath selling. Weird. Hang on a minute...
Paul Creasey

Clearly there's no easy solution to this. There had to be a limit put on the number of **E**128s manufactured, but its popularity exceeded our expectations by a long margin. Start saving for the 20-year anniversary-edition box set...

"Blinded by hype, advertising and, more often than not, a media without a conscience, he had never 'strayed' to play titles such as Halo and other genre classics"

Next month:



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Otogi 2 (Xbox)



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Harvest Moon: It's A Wonderful Life (GC)



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Sabre Wulf (GBA)



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